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ISSUE 371
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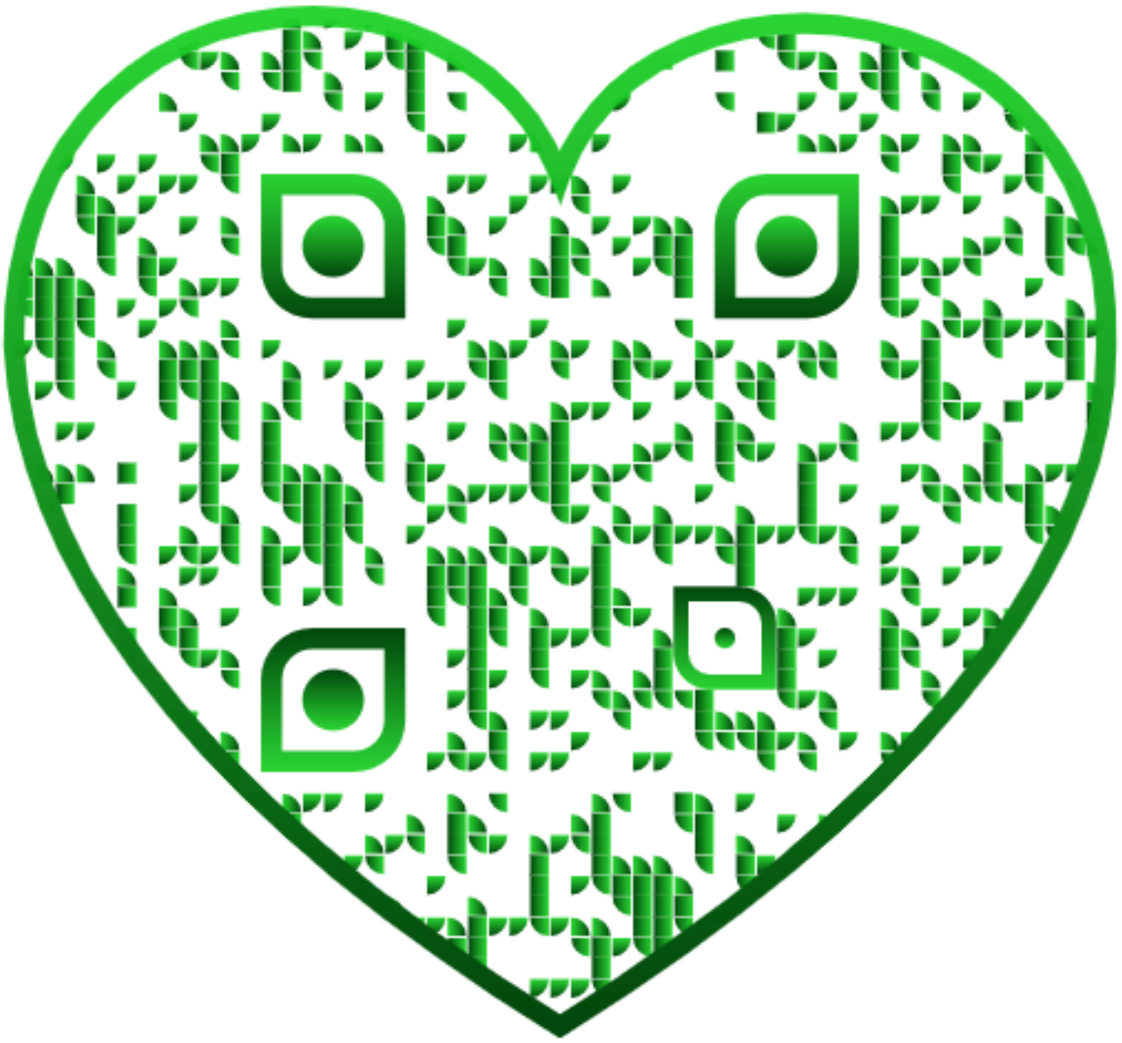

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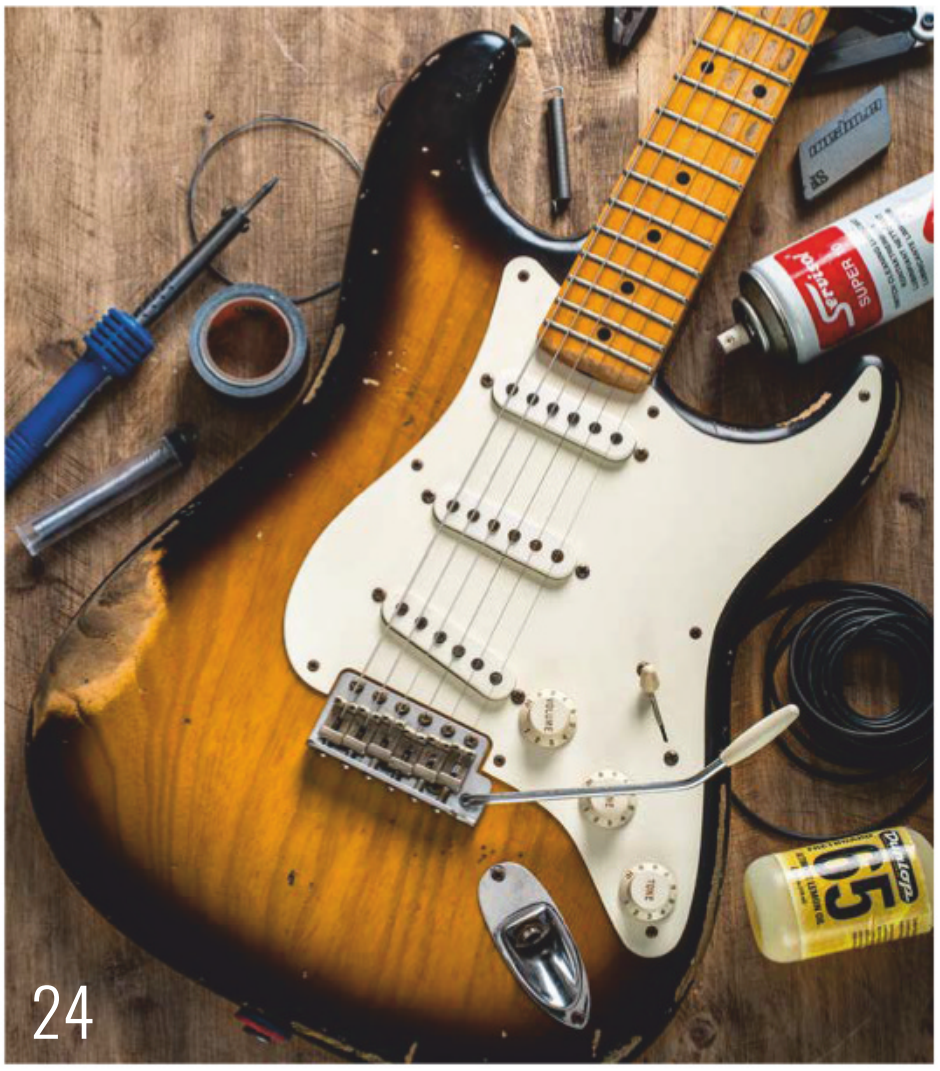
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EDITOR'S LETTER

THE GREAT RIG IN THE SKY

As I write this, David Gilmour's Black Strat has just broken all records for guitar auctions, selling for $3,975,000 (including buyer's premium) at Christie's in New York. The auction, which comprised 127 guitars from the Pink Floyd legend's collection, generated a massive $21 million – much of which will benefit each and every one of us as David has chosen to donate the proceeds to ClientEarth, a charity fighting against climate change. It's an extraordinary act of generosity and, in the case of the Black Strat, proof that a heavily modified instrument can take you a long way.

If tweaking and modding guitars is your thing, this month's magazine will serve you well. Aside from 45 indispensable pro tips and fixes that will help keep your guitar playing and sounding its best, we also share pearls of wisdom from Nirvana, Foo Fighters and Brandi Carlile guitar tech, Earnie Bailey. Meanwhile, our in-depth interview with Rodrigo y Gabriela also sees us go stage-side to talk to the techs who keep the duo's unconventional nylon-string rigs running smoothly on the world's biggest stages.

Elsewhere, we wind the clock back to the birth of the ultimate modular and modifiable electric guitar: the Stratocaster. Now 65 years old, this mid-century modern design icon is still the benchmark – just ask Macmull Custom Guitars, a company that has gone further than most in pursuit of vintage Fender tone. I get to grips with two of the boutique brand's dazzling creations on p102 and try very hard to persuade myself that I don't need another guitar. Good luck with that, right?

Chris Vinnicombe
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FRETBUZZ

Your letters and observations on the world of guitar

Join the conversation Email us at editors@guitar.com

PLUMBING NEW DEPTHS

Dear *Guitar Magazine*, As a regular subscriber, I have noted the recent interest in Fender offset guitars – and having never ventured away from Strats and Teles I now have a really good Jazzmaster. The only negative is the vibrato bar. Mine is a 2014 Mexican model in sunburst, so has the screw-in variety, but it still has a degree of play, can rattle and become floppy.

In my opinion, the answer is a captive ball bearing like on my Franke kitchen sink plug hole, where the shaft's ball bearing keeps the small drainer/plug under tension. This would work so well for a Jazzmaster/Jaguar wang bar… Let me know your thoughts, keep up the good magazine!

MICHAEL BENTLEY, VIA EMAIL

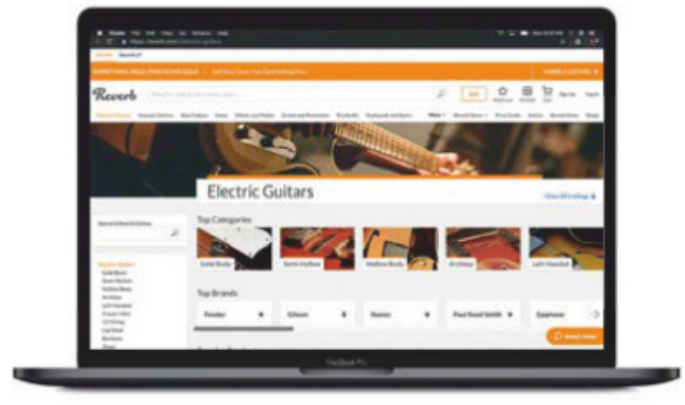
It's certainly an interesting and innovative idea, Michael. So what do our offset-playing readers think? Has this idea plugged a gap in your guitar-playing life, or is it sinking without a trace?

READER SADS

Dear *Guitar Magazine*, I guess it's just a sign of the times that your Reader Ads page has disappeared at last – does the dreaded eBay have anything to do with this? I used to love trawling through the guitars, amps and pedals for sale and I've had a good few bargains over the years. I actually sold my 70s Gibson ES-355 within hours of the mag being on sale years ago, and I was pushing my luck (or so I thought) by daring to try selling such a 'rarity'! But then again, I suppose if the demand isn't there anymore, what can you do? Still a shame, though.

ROB 'ANGELO' SAWYER, VIA EMAIL

You've hit the nail on the head, Rob – most of us of a certain age will look back fondly on hours spent scouring free ads in guitar magazines looking for bargains, but the reality is the internet has rendered the Reader Ads section somewhat redundant. Over the last few years, it had become increasingly difficult to get enough submissions for us to fill a page every month, and rather than make people wait for several months until we could run their ad, we thought it best to quietly retire the page when we revamped the mag earlier this year. We'll miss it just like you, but places like Reverb, eBay and even Facebook Marketplace and Gumtree still offer guitar bargains for those willing to search for them!



FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

I have to have at least 22 frets on a guitar. You couldn't play that outro riff to *Freebird* or *Back In Black* on a 21-fret guitar – it's just too old-school for me!

TOM CROW, FACEBOOK

I've always used feeler gauges for setting string height on my guitars and it works for me. Three-barrel-saddle Telecasters are always going to be a compromise, however.

DAVID BUTLER, FACEBOOK

Mick Ronson was the only guitarist who truly shared the stage with David Bowie, but they were all very different in styles and tone – different eras called for different styles.

JOHN CRANE, FACEBOOK

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ONES TO WATCH

SINEAD BURGESS @SINEADBURGESS

INTERVIEW CHRIS VINNICOMBE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

Australian singer-songwriter Sinead Burgess began writing songs as a child and signed her first record deal in her teens, but these days, she's primarily based in Nashville and very much in charge of her own musical destiny…

When did you first discover the guitar?
"My first encounter with a guitar was actually my brother's. He got it for a birthday. It was played a couple times then started collecting dust. I'd played piano since I was five and I remember looking at his acoustic one day and having an overwhelming desire to learn how to play it. Once I picked it up, I didn't put it down."

When did you start writing songs?
"My first documented song was when I was five. It was pretty dreadful [laughs]. But it's absolutely been something I've found myself doing as long as I can remember. My influences definitely revolved back then around my parents' era, and really, still do today. My earliest memory of music was listening to The Beatles, ELO, Chicago, Elton John, Fleetwood Mac – real songwriters with mega songs. I'm a huge Tom Petty fan and can't get enough of heartfelt singer-songwriters like Glen Hansard and Brandi Carlile. I feel like I'm constantly inspired by wordsmiths that have a knack of saying so much with so little."

When it comes to songwriting, do you prefer the guitar or the keyboard?
"I find it definitely depends on my mood. My songs really do stem directly from the instruments and the feeling for me. I always get songs I wouldn't get from piano on guitar, and vice versa."

How do you think your music has developed since your first EP in 2009?
"My musical journey has definitely been a long one. I've always been a girl on a guitar with something to say, but it's just been dressed in different ways over the years for many different reasons. It took me a couple of hard turns to finally have the courage to strip back to the bare bones, which is what has always musically resonated with me. It can take a minute to become strong in the things you love and hold true. At least, it did for me. But there is something so freeing and deeply moving about striving to create real music that can stand on just a solo acoustic guitar, and discovering that has been the best and most truthful musical breakthrough of my career."

Do you think Australian musicians have to move to the US to realise their potential?
"I think Australia definitely has the ability to be self-sufficient; it is in so many ways already. I know a lot of artists in Oz that have a healthy living playing music. But at this point, anything slightly off the beaten path musically, or 'hard to place', can get a little lost, which is why I think a lot of artists travel abroad. There's a lot of inspiration that comes from it, but also based on sheer numbers in the US, it can be a little more possible to find your tribe. My ultimate goal has been to be a full-time touring artist and grow a fanbase who care about albums and shows. No matter how big or small. Even when I was based in Australia, it was always a desire to travel all over the world."

What guitars are you playing the most?
"My absolute go-to road dog is my blonde Gibson J-200. We've played so many gigs, I've lost count. I beat the shit out of it. I'd always wanted one – Petty of course! – and this one honestly is the best-sounding one I've ever played. I've been playing so many acoustic shows, so my gear has been quite minimal, which is refreshing! I gig with the acoustic, a Bigfoot stomp box made in Australia and a harmonica. That's been my staple kit in the past couple of years.

"Recording-wise, I have an old '75 Blonde J-200 as well that records incredibly beautifully. I used it all throughout my *Damaged Goods* acoustic record. My favourite home guitar is my little 1950s Gibson LG 3/4 I was lucky enough to get from Norman's Rare Guitars. It's so rough and ready and cranky, but it has a thing that can be super inspiring for certain things."

What's next on your agenda?
"I'm working on my next round of songs now. One will hopefully rear its head around August, before I head back to Australia to play the Country To Country festival. I'll be testing the tunes out on the road over the next couple of months!"

For more info, visit sineadburgessmusic.com

THE PLAYLIST

ALBUM SPOTLIGHT

DINOSAUR PILE-UP

CELEBRITY MANSIONS

INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER

Dinosaur Pile-Up frontman and guitarist Matt Bigland picks his five guitar highlights from the UK band's major-label debut

Leeds alt-rockers Dinosaur Pile-Up have been bringing bruising riffs and killer hooks to the masses since 2010, but their new major-label debut *Celebrity Mansions* sees the power trio reach a new level. Read on as main-man Matt Bigland pinpoints five key moments…

STUPID HEAVY METAL BROKEN HEARTED LOSER PUNK

"The middle section might be my favourite moment on the whole record. It's just *so* fun and out there. I love that it was a half-a-second decision to take the song that way just because it felt cool and as soon as I'd done it, I was like, 'Oh shit, that kicks!'.

"I honestly couldn't tell you what amps we used, because the pile of heads (and I literally mean a pile) went from the table they were all on to the ceiling of the dingy studio room we were in. We used the ceiling itself to lodge the heads on top of the table. It was a joke. There were a bunch of Marshalls – JCM800 and a JMP for sure – a Diezel VH4 which we'd borrowed, an old Laney Klipp that me and Larry Hibbitt [producer] had previously set on fire. Pretty sure we used Gibson Explorers and SGs on the chorus and riffs, and tripped-out Fender Jags on the verses. All the little bends and trills popping out at the start of that heavy-metal riff were just me fucking about before actually taking on the second half. I was like, 'Cut all that out' to Larry and then we played it back and I was like, 'Actually, leave all that in, it's awesome!'… We were just having such a good time getting heavy!"

THRASH METAL CASSETTE

"Coming up with that riff is one of my favourite memories of writing the album. We were sound-checking in Orlando at the House Of Blues there, and I was just noodling about waiting to play my rig for our sound guy. I just bust out this riff and started going with it, and in the corner about 15 feet away, like in the shadowy bit at the edge of the stage, I see this stage hand just listening, and he is *into it*… he's fucking banging his head, *digging* that riff! I was like – 'Shit! That's got a vibe going already? That's fast!'"

BACK FOOT

"It's so lucky that it even became a song, because I wrote it in the shower! I literally must've sang that little riff like once, for maybe 10 seconds or something. And I thought, 'You know what, fuck it, I'll record that on my phone because it's okay'. So I did. Got out the shower, recorded it on my phone. It so easily could have been forgotten about. But I didn't forget about it, I kinda kept thinking about it. And then the next day, I thought, 'Fuck it, let's look at that little weird riff…' and from that moment, I didn't sleep for four straight days because it earwormed its way into my poor brain and I couldn't sleep until I'd finished it. It was horrible and awesome, ha ha! It really showed me the importance of running with even the smallest of ideas."

POURING GASOLINE

"I love the intro to *Pouring Gasoline*, because I think we were recording with an SG or something, decided to change over to a noisy Jaguar and just recorded me plugging it in and going straight into a take and we're like, 'That's awesome, leave it.' I love shit like that, just like interesting beginnings or intros that haven't been castrated of all their vibe. You're making a rock record, it should sound like one.

"We were thinking of songs like *Territorial Pissings* and Smashing Pumpkins vibes a lot with this track, so we DI'd a bunch of horrible overdrive and fuzz pedals to get some of the sounds on this. I can't remember what we used in the end. But I know we tried a RAT and a Boss Metal Zone, maybe this banged-out old pedal from the 60s called Fuzztone or something."

LONG WAY DOWN

"The solo in *Long Way Down* is one of my favourite moments of the record, or more specifically, the end of the solo. Because on one of the takes, I just kept on playing and wigging out at the end where I was meant to have stopped. I was just kind of really enjoying or feeling the emotional energy of the song and I was, 'Fuck it! I don't wanna stop yet!' so I just kept on playing through.

"I wailed a bit and pulled around the neck and then found this little groove of a melody that kind of fit with the vocal and the progression – and I just sat into that and played it out till the very end of the track. And we were like, 'That's fucking cool!'. It's kind of a bit out-of-tune-y… but we literally only did one take of the solo with that ending on it, so we just kept it… It just had a feeling about it and an energy and sometimes you shouldn't fuck with that."

***Celebrity Mansions* by Dinosaur Pile-Up is out now on Parlophone**

This month's essential tracks for guitar lovers…

DANIEL TOMPKINS
Limitless
The Tesseract singer's debut solo offering features many sonic delights and unusually, an electro-pop feel on an album laden with synths and soundscapes.

STEPHEN TARANTO
Pixel Heart: Verdant
A wondrously progressive instrumental track that employs some incredibly fluid guitar lines that, while jaw-droppingly flawless, still augment the catchy melodies.

IAN NOE
Between The Country
A stark album full of desolation, Noe recalls vintage John Prine throughout. Arpeggiated acoustics are accompanied by simple rhythms and reverb-drenched lead lines.

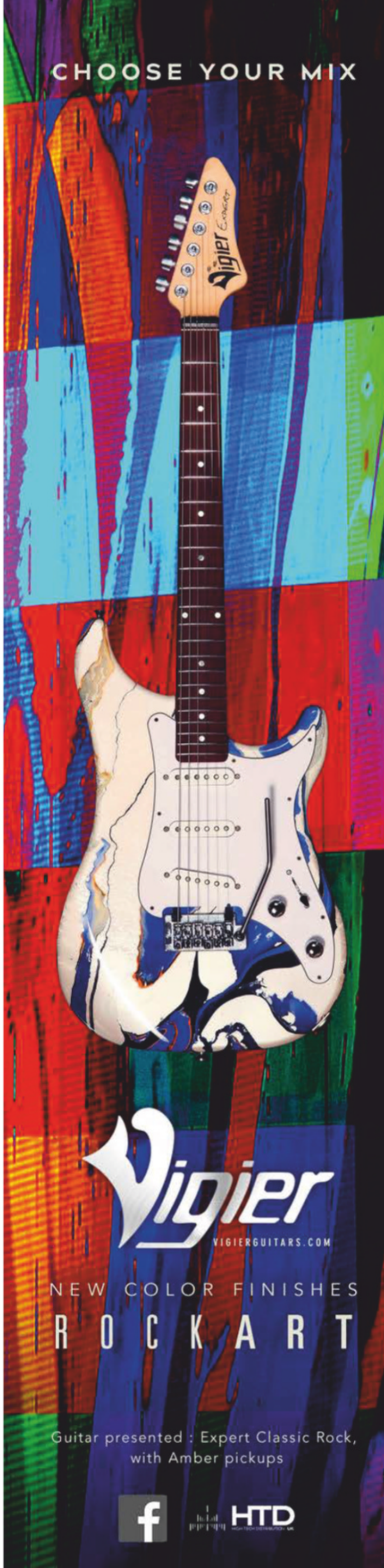
VAL MCCALLUM
Chateauguay
The title track from McCallum's new album of tasteful Americana showcases his acoustic, electric and slide prowess – no wonder he's Jackson Browne's go-to guitarist.

TEMPLES
Hot Motion
The first single since the band moved to esteemed indie label ATO Records, *Hot Motion* is classic Temples with saturated guitars and James Bagshaw's vintage vocals.

SUNSET SONS
Problems
The France-based British-Australian surf rockers return with Foals-esque riffs that pave the way for a smooth, stripped-back guitar-pop anthem.

BILL FRISELL
Surfer Girl
Taken from 2014's *Guitar In The Space Age!*, this showcases Frisell's ability to honour the classics. The incomparable jazz guitarist talks about his new LP *Epistrophy* on p64.

LUCY DACUS
My Mother & I
We speak to Lucy Dacus on p58 about her forthcoming album. Released for Mother's Day, this track allows her evocative vocals to float above her intricate guitar playing.



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INDUSTRY INSIDER

LIGHTNING WAVE

INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER

New Zealand boutique effects maker Lightning Wave creates modulation-based analogue effects with digital brains that blend sonic experimentalism with ease of use. Inventor Lee Nicolson tells us more…

How did you get into guitar?
"Around eight or nine, my cousin gave me Metallica's 'Black Album' on cassette and the riffs blew my mind. I took a few lessons with an acoustic, but was a bit of a wuss and couldn't get past the sore fingertips!

"I found a Diplomat bass under a bed at my grandparents' when I was 15 and although the neck had banana'd and was barely playable, I got a kick out of hearing it clip through my parents' stereo. This led to a friend loaning me her spare Strat copy and she egged me on enough to buy my own electric guitar and a Blazer amp. With some decent overdrive and reverb, it was all downhill!"

When did you start tinkering with effects?
"I think I had a basic understanding of things with batteries and wires from an early age through pulling apart whatever I could get my hands on. When I started collecting gear and it played up, the next logical step was to pull it to pieces and figure out if I could fix it without having to pay someone. It probably wasn't until after finishing a music degree, around 2010 that I met a friend Gordon through the drummer in my first band Thundercub, who gave me a window into the world of breadboarding, schematics and PCB etching."

What was the moment you realised that you could turn your hobby into a business?
"Gordon really sparked the idea. We were inspired by NZ builders like Ben from Red Witch and Paul Crowther, who were really our only point of reference for what success looked like in the NZ pedal scene."

Did you have any investors/government grants etc, to help you establish yourself?
"There was a benefit scheme for artists and creatives in NZ to give them a start, but not really much in the way of mentoring to help with planning. I just wound up with a colour printer and a drill press. Dunedin is a cheap place to live, so I got by with some bar work and eventually a solder-monkey job. I've gotten a lot of support from my pedal buddy Jonny Arthur who designs 80tape effects. They are on another level.

"He wrote all the firmware for the Lightning Wave pedals and has been putting up with the feature-creep ever since. My little sister, Becky, has also been an endless source of positivity and motivation. She's invested a lot of time into helping me plan, badgers me when I procrastinate and can solder like a boss whenever I'm swamped."

At what point did you feel like you 'nailed' your branding?
"The Lightning Wave branding came together last minute for Winter NAMM '16 with the help of an artist friend Josh Hunter, who worked on the graphics for the first guitar effects. They started as band-themed but ended up with a dystopian 80s sci-fi vibe. We couldn't find any screen printers for pedal cases in NZ at the time, so I took a chance in making the gold and black faceplates. The artistic side of the design is a real challenge for me to articulate, so I'm never really certain of it. I had a go at laying out the EVA graphics later on with some slow progress, but have been catching up with Josh again to come up with some ideas for future products."

How did you come up with your best-selling product?
"The Ghost was based on a combination of different modules that were developed to remotely control analogue circuitry using a graphical interface. I met Jonny through a local pedal forum in 2013. He offered to try to tackle the problem by introducing a microcontroller into the mix and it really snowballed from there."

What's your proudest moment as a maker to date?
"Earlier this year, I finished a sub-20mm-diameter amp knob that's self-illuminated, can recall a preset and lasts a really long time with a generic battery size. The main idea behind it was for sharing amps at gigs and getting back to previous settings without needing to scramble in the dark right before a set. It started before I knew how to etch a PCB and took countless versions to get it right, making it my longest-running project. I've got no idea what to do with it now… but seeing the

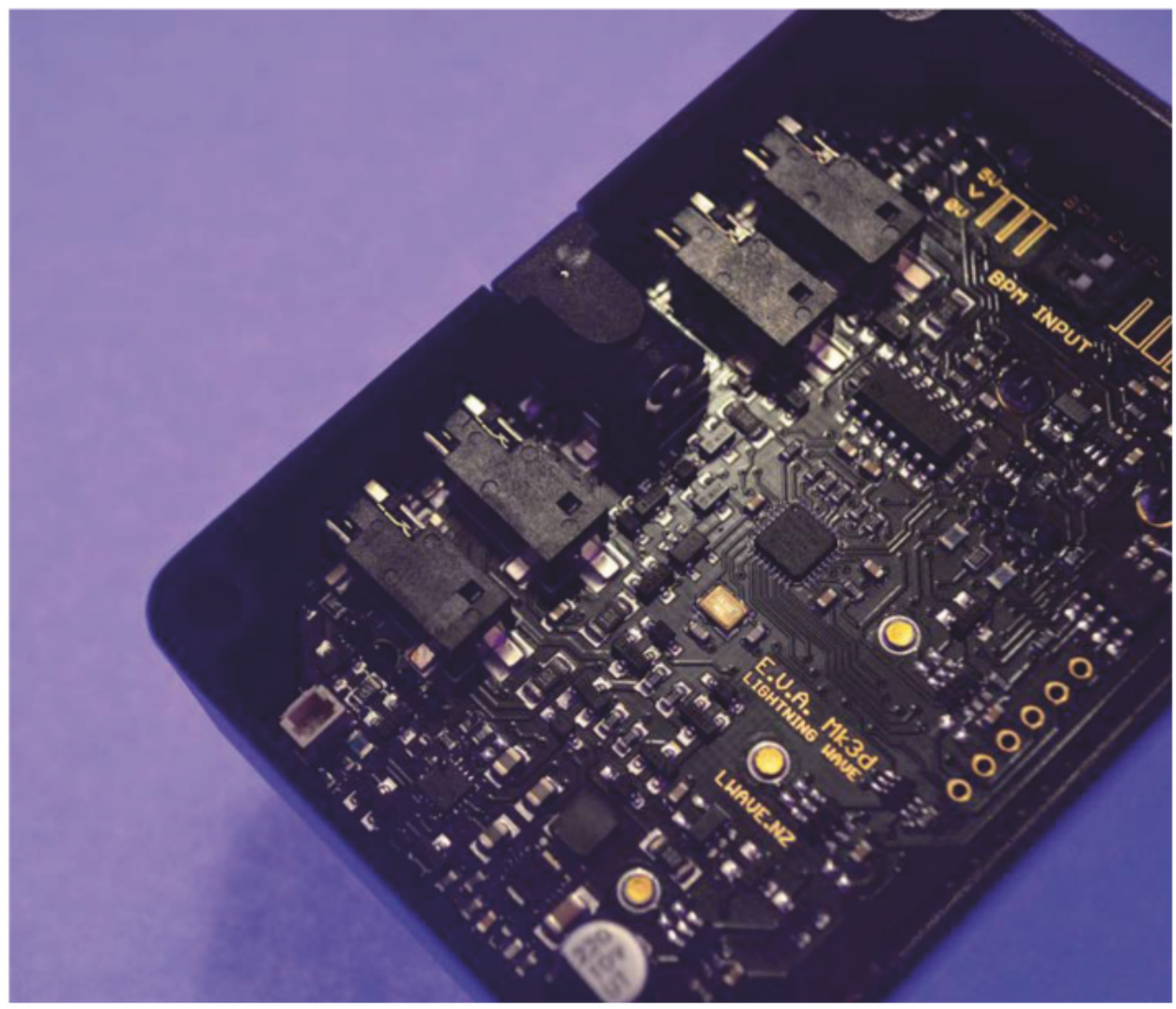
Ghost is a transparent tremolo, Doom offers control over crossfade and Astro is a versatile phaser effect

pile of prototypes and ideas that came out of them has been a great exercise in teaching myself how to problem-solve!"

What do you think are the biggest challenges and opportunities for the guitar industry in 2019?
"I'm blown away by the growing number of independent companies with great ideas, but perhaps there is a bit of frustration going around. The internet mainly highlights successes rather than the late nights and hard work trying to create momentum. It would be cool if people could explore opportunities for larger collaborations which could lead to things like better platforms for getting noticed, and easier ways to share skillsets to build off each other's strengths."

Can you give us any details of your plans for the future?
"I'm currently about to release a small batch of the EVA mk3D, which is a miniaturised form of the Lightning Wave CV and sync functionality with a rechargeable battery. They're in their final testing stages now. And I'm just about to move from Dunedin to Wellington, which is an exciting development. I might need some time to set up a workspace somewhere, but will have no shortage of projects to dig into!"

"WE WERE INSPIRED BY BUILDERS LIKE BEN FROM RED WITCH AND PAUL CROWTHER, WHO WERE REALLY OUR ONLY POINT OF REFERENCE FOR WHAT SUCCESS LOOKED LIKE IN THE NZ PEDAL SCENE"



AFFORDABLE ACOUSTIC GUITARS

WORDS JOSH GARDNER

Our guide to the best-sounding and most player-friendly acoustic guitars you can own without breaking the bank…

1 EASTMAN E1D

A no-nonsense, all-solid dreadnought, Eastman's E1D is aimed at guitarists looking for that 'first upgrade' instrument, and it offers plenty of bang for your buck – literally! The projection and volume that the E1D's solid Sitka spruce top and solid sapele back and sides can produce is remarkable, so you won't have any trouble being heard, even though there are no electronics onboard.

It's not all about power, either – it's well-voiced to accompany singer-songwriters.

PRICE £499

2 TAYLOR GS MINI

The GS Mini has become a phenomenon among acoustic-guitar players – once you recognise the guitar's distinctive olive-coloured reinforced gigbag, you'll start noticing it everywhere.

Much more than an entry-level travel acoustic, the GS Mini's voice is balanced and resonant. With the excellent ES-Go pickup providing electro tones and great playability and build quality, the GS Mini is a dependable modern guitar for contemporary players.

PRICE £499

3 PRS SE T40E

Hailing from the SE acoustic range's most recent overhaul, the T40E embodies Paul Reed Smith's vision to create affordable acoustics that "can be for writing, rehearsing, performing, recording, or just trying to unwind at the end of a hard day".

The S40E's solid Sitka spruce top and laminated ovangkol back and sides produce a lush bass response with excellent volume and sustain. You also get the Fishman GT1 electro system, so amplifying your tone is easy and convenient.

PRICE £649

4 MARTIN LX1E LITTLE MARTIN

If you're on a budget but want an iconic heritage brand name on your headstock, this mini-Martin is the answer – and it certainly doesn't offer a small tone. While the spruce top is solid, the back, sides and neck are all made of high-pressure laminate and the ornamentation is stripped back to the bare essentials for Dust Bowl-era visual austerity.

Acoustically, it's a scaled-down version of the classic Martin sound, and it's a similar story when plugged in.

PRICE £499

5 ART & LUTHERIE LEGACY TENNESSEE RED

Canadian company Art & Lutherie is part of the Godin family and sets itself apart from the affordable acoustic-guitar crowd via eye-catching guitars with vintage vibes. The cherry-coloured stain applied to the concert-sized Legacy retains a pleasing, weathered vintage vibe. What's more, with a wonderfully sleek neck it's hugely playable, and sounds great, too – in looks and tone a perfect folk and blues guitar for not a lot of money.

PRICE £399

FENDER PARAMOUNT PM-3 STANDARD

6 In recent years, the Big F has overhauled and expanded its range of affordable flat-tops, creating a selection of quality instruments designed in California and built in China.

The PM-3 – an all-solid 000-sized cutaway electro – is proof Fender means business. With the classic spruce/mahogany combo, excellent build quality, attractive styling, a neck slinky enough to welcome in electric players and a sound that will cope with almost any playing style, there's a lot to like here.

PRICE £599

SIGMA SDM-15

7 Once Martin's budget brand, Sigma was bought by Germany's AMI in 2012, when it began producing new guitars in Asia. Since then, the reborn Sigma has earned a reputation as a producer of fantastic budget acoustics nodding to both Martin and Gibson. The SDM-15 is an all-solid mahogany case in point – an elegant dreadnought with subtle ornamentation, fantastic playability and a characterful roots-ready tonality; plus a Fishman Sonitone pickup.

PRICE £499

ALVAREZ AD60

8 If you're after a high-quality, great-value dreadnought, the AD60 from US company Alvarez might well hit the spot. While it doesn't have all-solid construction, the AD60 does sport an A-grade Sitka spruce top. And while the back and sides are laminated mahogany, this guitar proves quality wood can compensate for a lack of solid timbers. The AD60 would represent good value at twice the price and has a balanced tone, whether strummed or finger-picked. G

PRICE £299

BE YOUR OWN GUITTECH

45 ESSENTIAL MAINTENANCE & TONE TIPS

Whether your number-one is a sticker-covered, blood-splattered road warrior or a much-cherished heirloom, one thing's for sure: sooner or later, every guitar needs a little TLC. Before you pick up the phone and arrange an expensive trip to the luthier, this list of simple fixes, mods, upgrades and general maintenance tips might save you some money and help you sound better into the bargain…

WORDS HUW PRICE, CHRIS VINNICOMBE, JOSH GARDNER

DISCLAIMER We've split things up into the major food groups – Strats, Les Pauls, Teles, thinline semis, Gretsches and acoustics – but most of these tips apply to many other models and brands. If in doubt, we always recommend seeking out an experienced guitar tech and please proceed with extreme caution when it comes to vintage instruments – modifications can devalue your guitar in the eyes of collectors. All that said, if you can operate a screwdriver and a soldering iron and have the patience, there's often no reason why you can't have a go yourself. Write in and let us know how you get on!

AR

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SWITCH CLEANING
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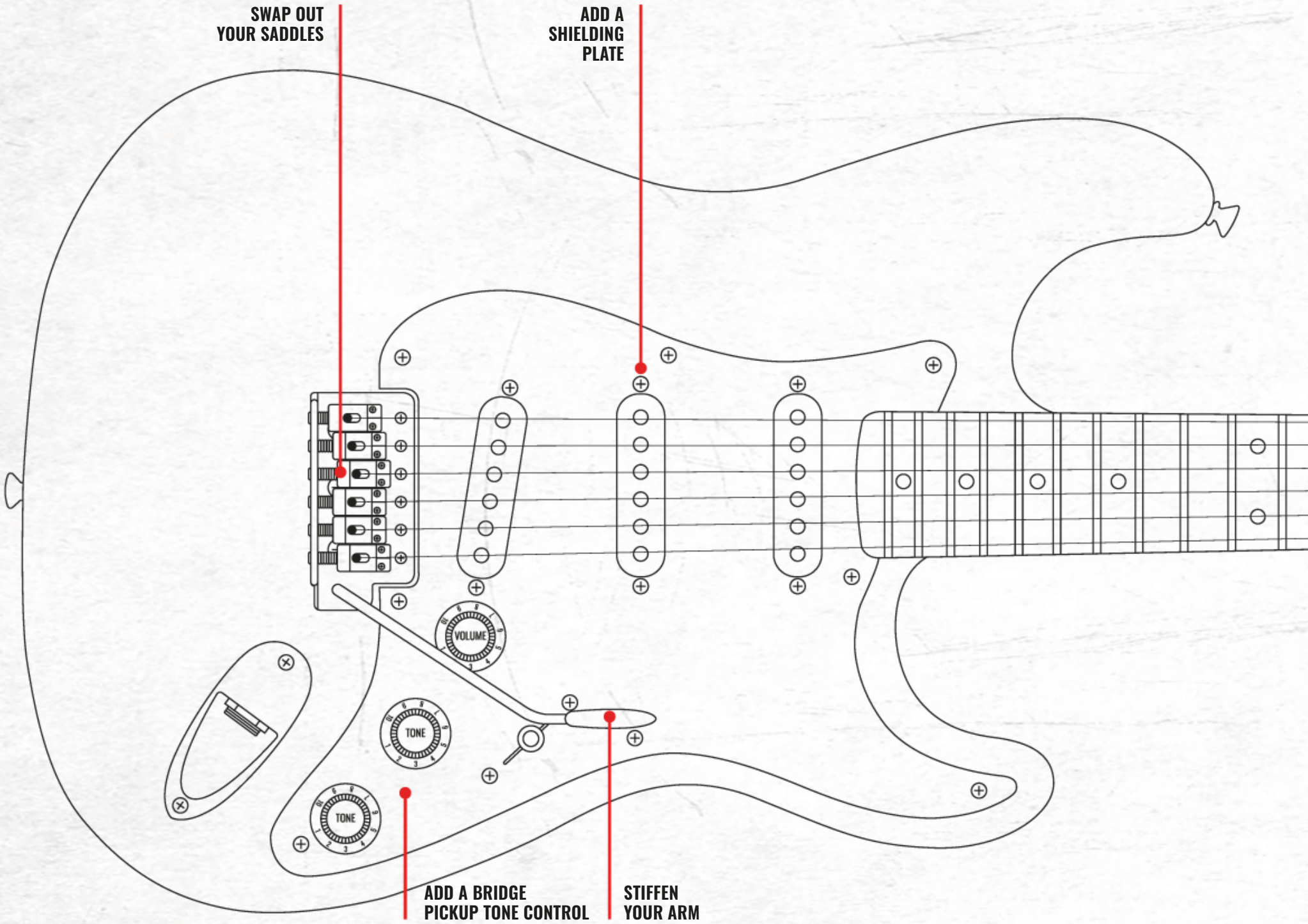
SORT OUT YOUR STRAT



1 TIGHTEN UP YOUR NECK

If a guitar's neck is loose in its pocket, it will be less effective at transferring vibrations. On top of that, the neck may actually move around, causing tuning instability and even string slippage. On occasion, you can see a gap between the bottom of the neck and the neck pocket, even when the screws are fully tightened. Assuming there's no shim, this could be because the screw holes in the body are too narrow for the screws. If you can't push the plate screws straight through the body holes, you should have them drilled out to increase their diameter.

2 BLOCK THE TREMOLO

Some Strat players never use the vibrato – Robert Cray and Billy Gibbons prefer hardtails – but most consider the springs to be an essential component of the Stratocaster sound. How can you have a vibrato-loaded Strat that can be tuned up in a single pass and won't go out of tune when you snap a string? Simple: tighten the spring claw, place a lump of wood between the bridge block and the back of the vibrato rout and slacken off the claw to allow string tension to wedge it in place. It's simple, it's cheap, and it works. Just ask Eric Clapton.

3 CLEAN UP YOUR NECK POCKET

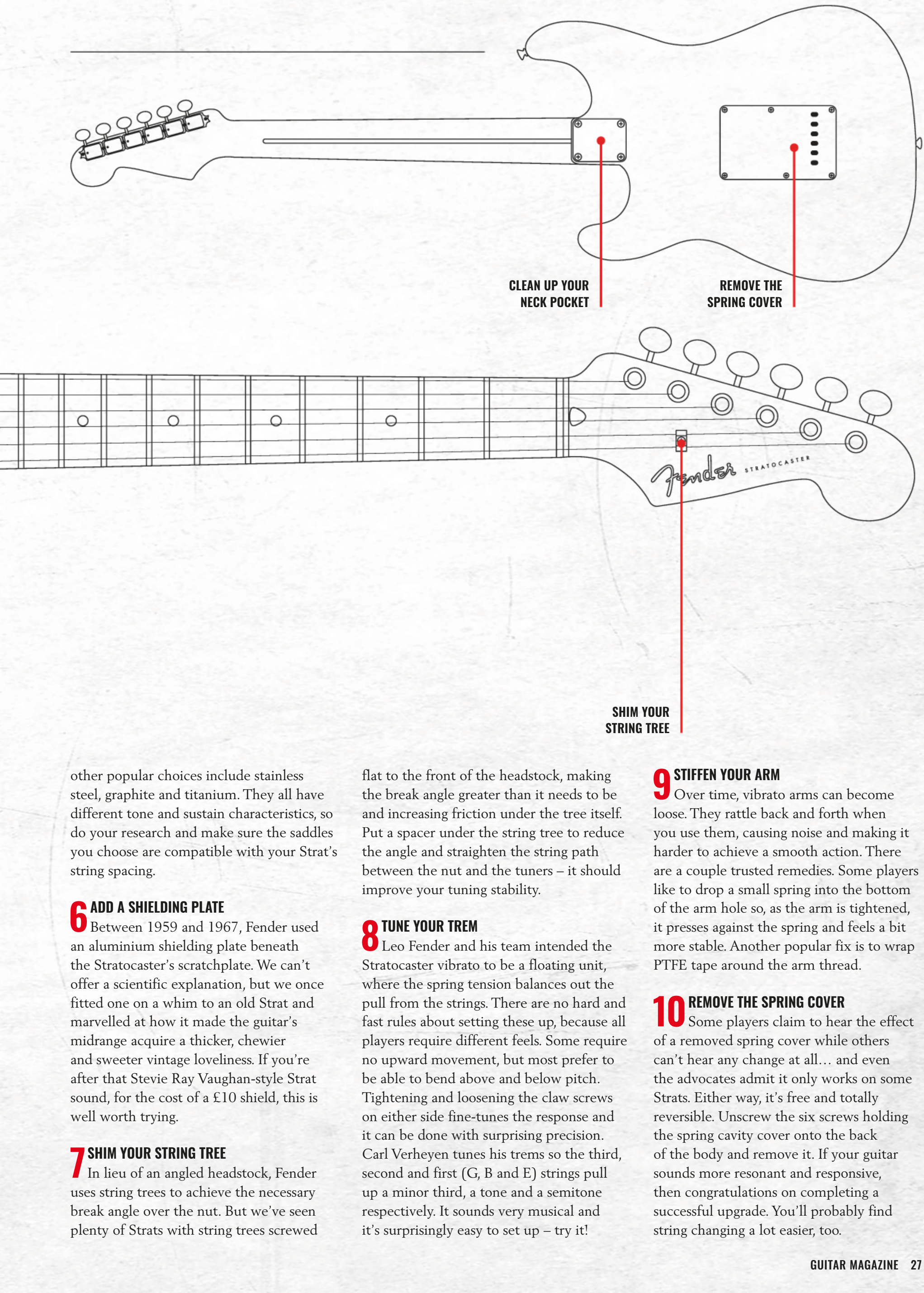
To resonate together as one, the body and neck of a guitar should be coupled as tightly as possible. Wood-to-wood contact is ideal – but this isn't the way things generally turn out. Pop the neck off and you can find various horrors in the pocket. A shim is often needed to achieve an optimal neck angle – and it's accepted practice – but rubber grommets, cardboard and scraps of sandpaper are not ideal. Try a sliver of hardwood veneer if you need to shim. Many necks have labels and stickers in between the screw holes. Peel them off and clean up any residual stickiness.

4 ADD A BRIDGE PICKUP TONE CONTROL

Many have wondered why Fender's original design chose to provide tone controls for the neck and middle pickups but neglected to provide treble roll-off for the pickup that actually needed it most. It's likely down to some combination of the darker tonality of early tweed amplifiers and the high-treble requirements of the Western swing players who were Leo's clients, but it's easy enough to remedy and if you can solder, it shouldn't cost a thing. Method one is to swap the middle (or neck) pickup's tone control to the bridge pickup; method two is to locate the wire that connects the second tone pot to the switch, then solder a short section of wire between that tag and the next tag along towards the middle of the switch. Problem solved.

5 SWAP OUT YOUR SADDLES

Most of the changes introduced during Fender's CBS era were intended to reduce costs. Like many other components, the quality of string saddles fell when a cheap alloy nicknamed 'monkey metal' replaced the bent steel. For vintage tone, steel saddles may provide a noticeable improvement;



other popular choices include stainless steel, graphite and titanium. They all have different tone and sustain characteristics, so do your research and make sure the saddles you choose are compatible with your Strat's string spacing.

6 ADD A SHIELDING PLATE

Between 1959 and 1967, Fender used an aluminium shielding plate beneath the Stratocaster's scratchplate. We can't offer a scientific explanation, but we once fitted one on a whim to an old Strat and marvelled at how it made the guitar's midrange acquire a thicker, chewier and sweeter vintage loveliness. If you're after that Stevie Ray Vaughan-style Strat sound, for the cost of a £10 shield, this is well worth trying.

7 SHIM YOUR STRING TREE

In lieu of an angled headstock, Fender uses string trees to achieve the necessary break angle over the nut. But we've seen plenty of Strats with string trees screwed flat to the front of the headstock, making the break angle greater than it needs to be and increasing friction under the tree itself. Put a spacer under the string tree to reduce the angle and straighten the string path between the nut and the tuners – it should improve your tuning stability.

8 TUNE YOUR TREM

Leo Fender and his team intended the Stratocaster vibrato to be a floating unit, where the spring tension balances out the pull from the strings. There are no hard and fast rules about setting these up, because all players require different feels. Some require no upward movement, but most prefer to be able to bend above and below pitch. Tightening and loosening the claw screws on either side fine-tunes the response and it can be done with surprising precision. Carl Verheyen tunes his trems so the third, second and first (G, B and E) strings pull up a minor third, a tone and a semitone respectively. It sounds very musical and it's surprisingly easy to set up – try it!

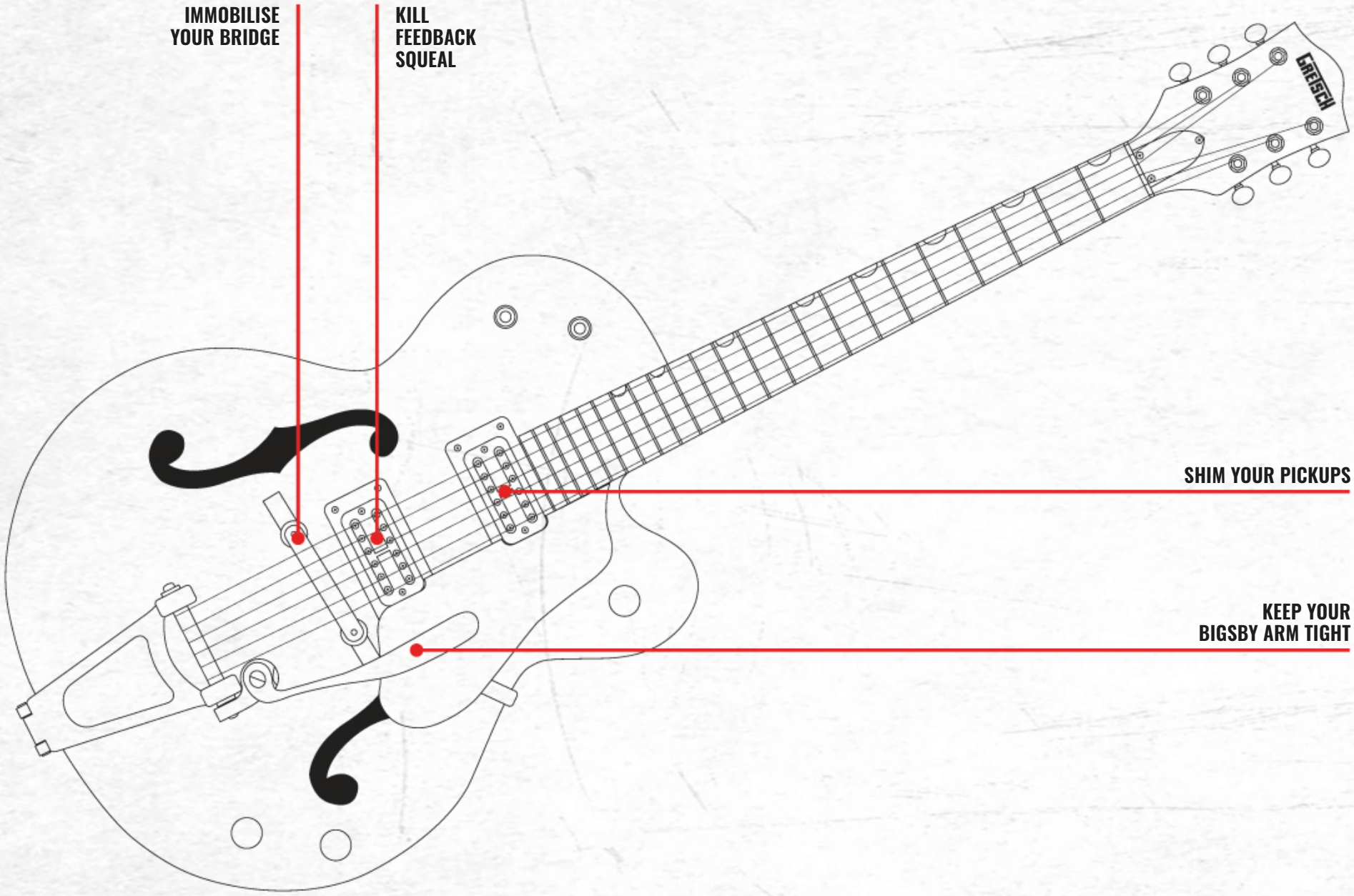
9 STIFFEN YOUR ARM

Over time, vibrato arms can become loose. They rattle back and forth when you use them, causing noise and making it harder to achieve a smooth action. There are a couple trusted remedies. Some players like to drop a small spring into the bottom of the arm hole so, as the arm is tightened, it presses against the spring and feels a bit more stable. Another popular fix is to wrap PTFE tape around the arm thread.

10 REMOVE THE SPRING COVER

Some players claim to hear the effect of a removed spring cover while others can't hear any change at all… and even the advocates admit it only works on some Strats. Either way, it's free and totally reversible. Unscrew the six screws holding the spring cavity cover onto the back of the body and remove it. If your guitar sounds more resonant and responsive, then congratulations on completing a successful upgrade. You'll probably find string changing a lot easier, too.

GET YOUR GRETSCH IN GEAR



1 IMMOBILISE YOUR BRIDGE

Although many new models come with this problem solved at the factory, when there isn't enough downward pressure on a traditional Gretsch bridge, it's all too easy for it to be knocked out of position. This is a well-known issue with archtop guitars in general – although heavier gauge strings might help, you would be compromising playability to fix a mechanical issue.

Fortunately, there are various solutions of varying degrees of invasiveness. Start by ensuring the guitar is set-up exactly the way you like it and the intonation is as accurate as possible. Carefully mark the position of the bridge by placing masking tape around the base. Now you have a few options.

Get some double-sided sticky tape. Rather than soft fabric-style carpet tape, go for double-sided Sellotape that's as thin as possible and will have minimal effect on vibration transfer. Apply the tape to the areas of the base that make contact with the body and trim the excess from the edges.

Line the bridge up carefully using your masking-tape markers and press the base down onto the body. You may need to renew the tape periodically, but many find this solution lasts for years. Some suggest that violin rosin and white glue work too, without damaging the finish. The alternative may be a luthier job, because it involves drilling through the bridge into the top of the guitar. Pins or small screws can then be used to fix the bridge and most choose to countersink them to make the modification as invisible as possible.

2 SHIM YOUR PICKUPS

You can achieve massive improvements in bass and treble balance, as well as overall tone, if you get the distances between the polepieces and strings just right. Unfortunately, vintage Gretsch pickups had no provision for height adjustment and many players have simply put up with things rather than explore the options.

Gretsch pickup guru TV Jones has been banging on about this for years and there's a page on his website dedicated to pickup adjustments. His recommended starting point is a 3/16-inch gap between the polepieces and the two E strings.

Since Filter'Trons and HiLo'Trons are screwed directly onto the body, you have to put springy foam spacers under the pickups to push upwards. Some people use mouse-mat material. DeArmond-style pickups require specially cut spacers, but they're easy to find online.

Set your polepieces as low as possible, adjust the overall pickup height, then fine-tune the polepieces if you feel the need. If you find your bridge Dynasonic too bright, spin it around 180 degrees to put the polepieces further from the bridge before you set the height.

3 SEAT YOUR ARCHTOP BRIDGE PROPERLY

You may have it pinned or taped, but for a traditional archtop-style bridge to transfer string vibrations into the body with the greatest efficiency, the base must be matched as closely as possible to the arch of the top.

Take a thin piece of paper and see if you can slip it under your bridge base. If you can find a gap anywhere, there's room for improvement, but fortunately, it's an easy fix. Cut out a rectangle of 320-grit abrasive paper that's about 5cm wide and about 3cm longer than the bridge base, then fix it to the top using masking tape.

The abrasive paper should be in the exact position of the bridge. Place the bridge base on top of the paper and move it back and forth very slightly following the direction of the strings. After a few movements, flip the bridge base over and you should be able to see areas of sanded and unsanded wood.

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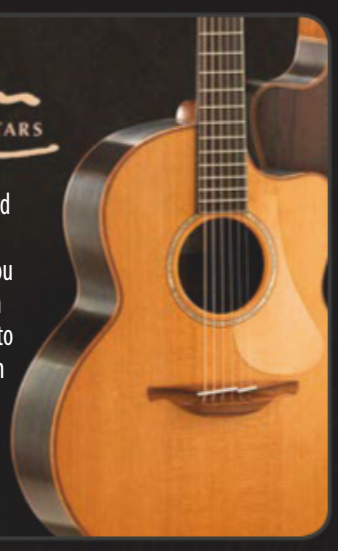

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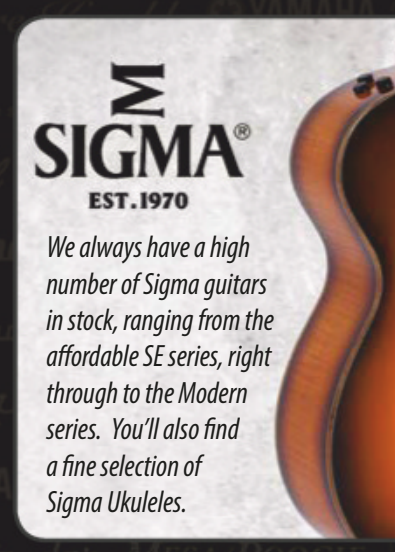

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GET YOUR GRETSCH IN GEAR continued

Continue a few strokes at a time, checking constantly, until all the wood shows evidence of contact with the abrasive. At that point, you're done. Remove the paper, refit the bridge and string up. The gaps should be gone and you will probably hear an improvement in acoustic tone. If you're happy with your bridge fit, mark the treble and bass sides with a pencil so the bridge will always be the right way around.

4 KEEP YOUR BIGSBY ARM TIGHT

Many of us will have suffered the problem of our Bigsby arms working loose or eventually falling off. Once you've slackened off the strings, reattached the arm and strung back up a few times, you'll probably be ready for a more permanent solution. The problem seems to be that moving the arm gradually loosens the retaining nut holding the arm onto the Bigsby assembly. Some swear by Nyloc nuts, but as always, opinions differ.

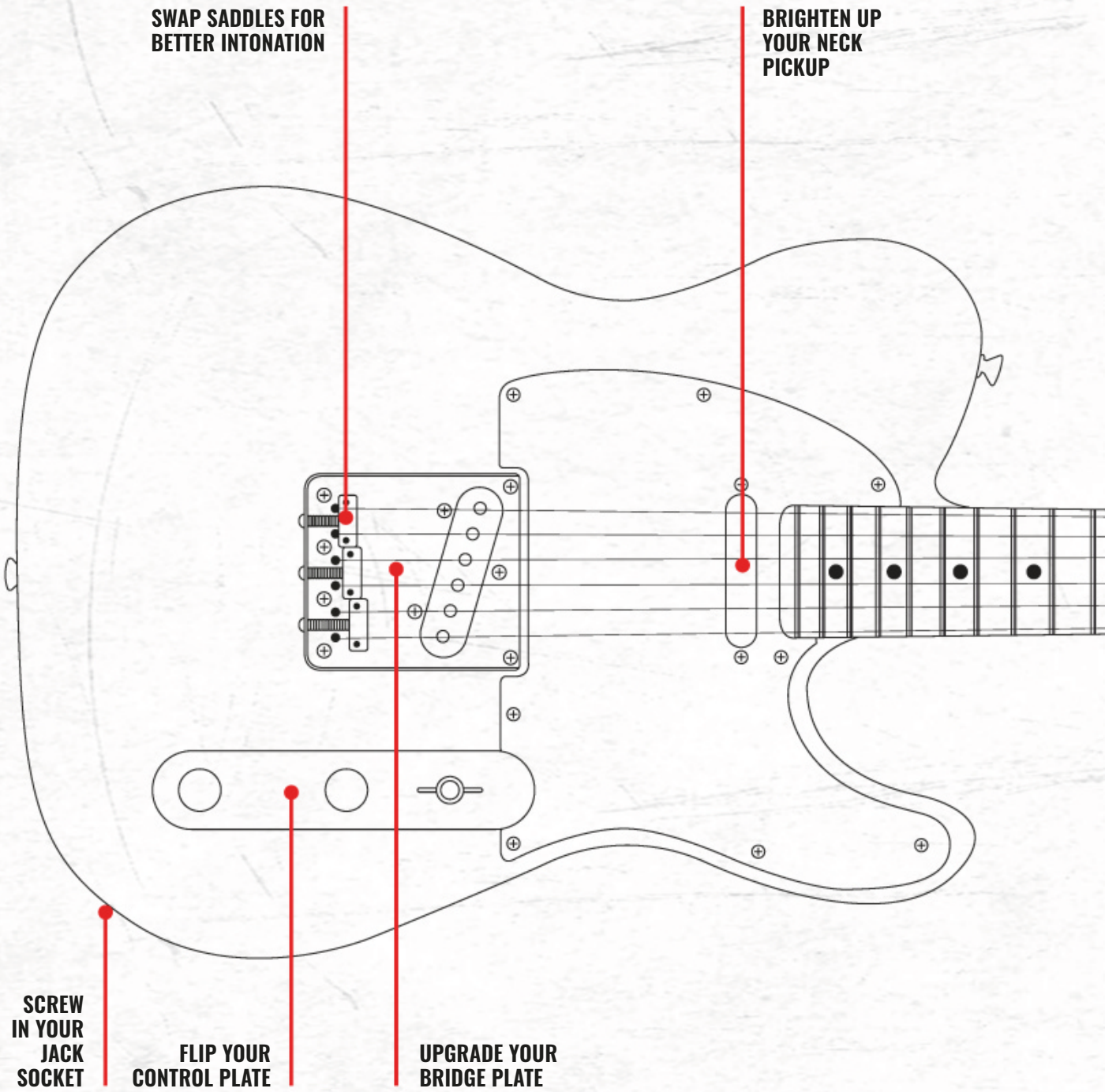
You may also find two thin nuts separated by a washer. That certainly applied to a '63 Tennessean owned by a member of the team – and the arm would fall off about once a week. Famed UK guitar tech Brinsley Schwarz fixed it by tightening the nut and locking everything together with Super Glue, and it's still holding over 20 years later.

5 KILL DEARMOND SQUEAL

DeArmond Dynasonics are often described as being like 'big-sounding Tele pickups' and just like Telecaster pickups, they have a tendency to squeal. Played clean at low-to-medium volume levels, Dynasonics can be very well behaved, but high volume and high gain can push them into microphonic feedback.

Underneath the bobbin, you'll find a complicated arrangement of screws, springs and retainers. Nothing is firmly fixed and soundwaves can certainly get everything moving all too easily. The key to killing the squeal is to stabilise the parts. You can get good results simply by wrapping strong elastic bands around the metal parts to bind everything tightly together. If you're suffering, the elastic-band trick is cheap and most certainly worth trying.

TROUBLESHOOT YOUR TELE



1 FLIP YOUR CONTROL PLATE

Almost from the beginning, players found the Tele's pickup switch too easy to knock accidentally, and spinning the control plate around was one of the first common mods that players figured out. It puts the volume and tone controls within easy reach and moves the selector switch safely out of the way. If you try this, remember to swap over the volume and tone potentiometers and flip the switch around, otherwise everything will work backwards!

2 SILENCE THAT SQUEAL

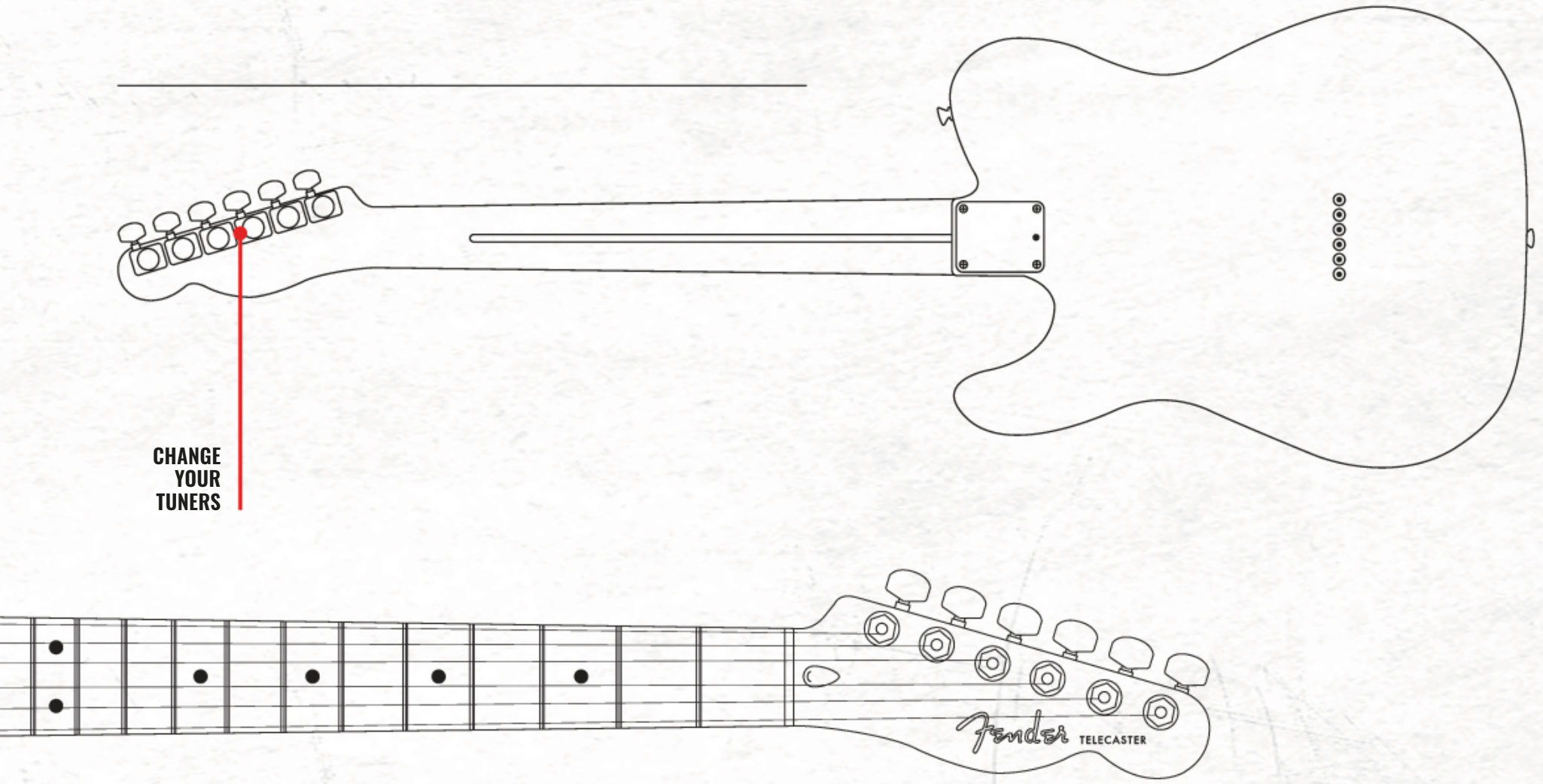
Microphonic feedback from Telecaster bridge pickups is commonplace, but is still no-less annoying for it. There are two simple ways to combat this: firstly, try swapping the spacer springs for 50s-style surgical tubing. You can also place some foam in the bottom of the pickup cavity; it has to be thick enough to press against the baseplate and dampen vibration, but not so thick that it prevents the height-adjustment screws from performing their function.

3 UPGRADE YOUR BRIDGE PLATE

For many years, players have complained that the sides of Fender's 'ashtray' bridge hinders access to the strings and takes the skin off their knuckles. If that's you, why not try a design with lowered sides from the likes of Gotoh or Callaham? There are also debates surrounding the tonal merits of bridges made of cold-rolled steel, brass and aluminium, while some also claim that squeal can be reduced if the base of the bridge is perfectly flat and smooth. Try a few and see which you prefer.

4 BRIGHTEN UP YOUR NECK PICKUP

Just like a traditional humbucker, the metal cover on a Telecaster neck pickup can suck a little treble from your tone. To unleash the full frequency potential of Tele neck pickups, just snip the cover's grounding connection. The downside is that you'll experience a bit of noise if you touch the cover, but that's easy to avoid and the extra brightness and transparency might persuade you to reconsider a pickup upgrade… or try a nickel-silver cover for less high-end attenuation than brass.



5 TRY TOP-LOADING

For a brief period in the late 1950s, Fender ceased through-body stringing on Telecasters and installed bridges with six holes drilled through the back lip. Many players feel that Teles with these 'toploader' bridges have a different sound. Detractors claim that top-loading reduces sustain, but fans point to enhanced twang, more bite and a ringing chime. Top-loading is also said to provide a more slinky feel – much like dropping down half a string gauge. If you want to try it yourself, either buy a top-loading bridge, or simply drill six holes in your existing unit.

6 SCREW IN YOUR JACK SOCKET

Traditional Tele jack sockets are held in place by a retainer clip that is notoriously fiddly to tighten up properly. Much more straightforward is a screw-in cup, such as those made by Electrosocket (allparts.uk.com). It pushes straight into the hole, two small screws go in on the diagonal to hold it in position and that's about it. The cup will never get loose, but you can take it in and out at will. Highly recommended.

7 STRAT-STYLE NECK PICKUP ADJUSTMENT

Traditionally, you have to remove the pickguard to adjust a Tele neck pickup as it's mounted to the body. To make adjustment less hassle, you can mount it to the pickguard like a Strat. Fix pieces of masking tape at each end of the pickup hole, flip the pickup over and drop it through the hole in the pickguard. With a sharp pencil or pen, you can mark the position of the pickup's screw holes onto the masking tape and drill through with an appropriate-sized bit. Remember, you'll need new screws that will bite into the pickup's bottom-flat, but you should be able to reuse the spring or tube spacers.

8 CHANGE YOUR SADDLES TO SOUND BETTER

Fender experimented with the materials of Tele saddles almost from the start and the different metals will give different tonal outcomes. Brass is regarded as having a smoother, richer tone, but steel has a brighter, snappier attack with more growl. Aluminium is said to give the bright 'acoustic' quality of steel without sacrificing the thickness and body of brass. There's no right answer – it's about what works best with your guitar and amp's particular sonic characteristics.

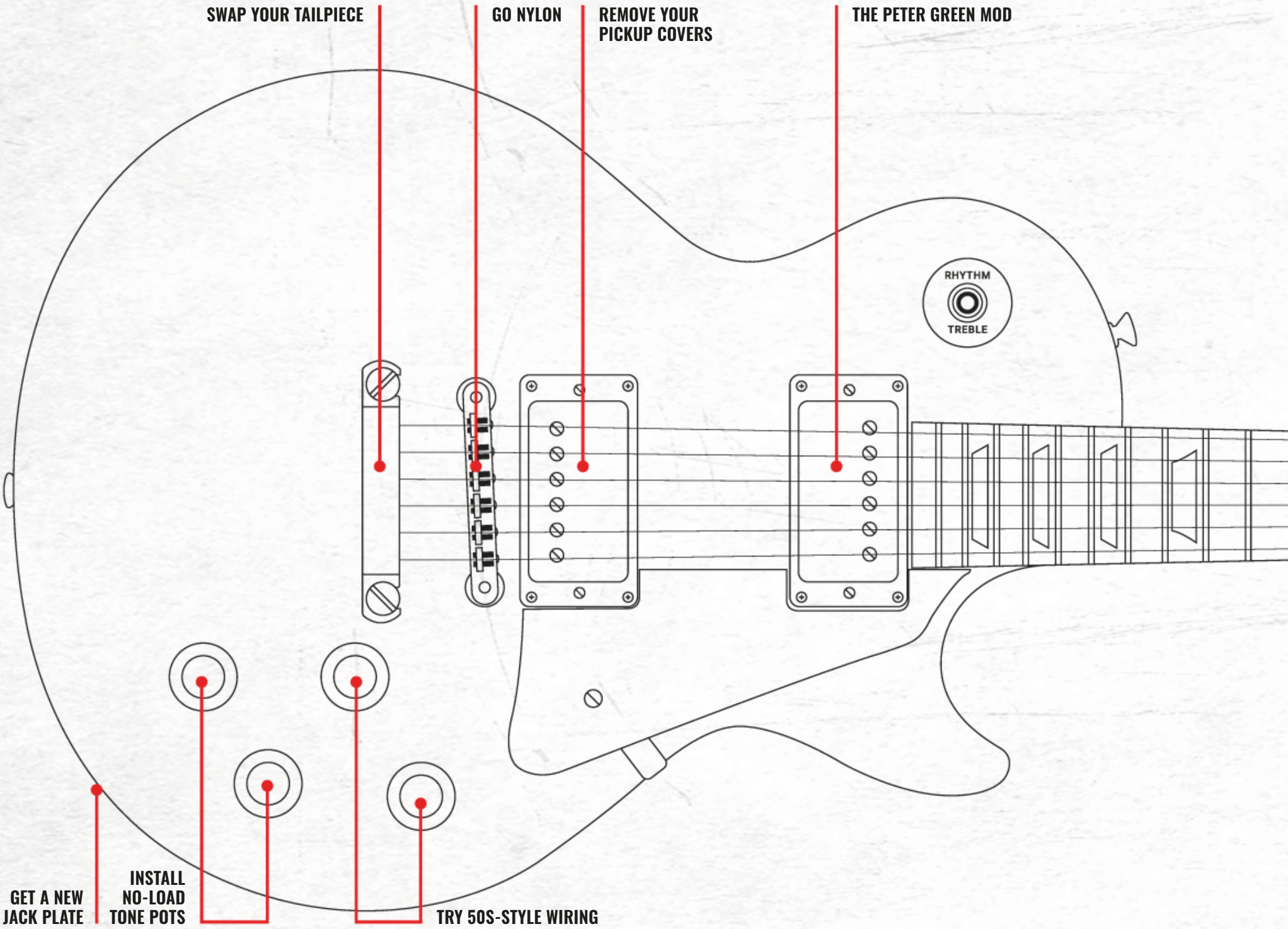
9 CHANGE YOUR TUNERS

Diecast tuners can make a light-bodied Tele a bit neck-heavy, so swapping them out for a set of vintage-style Kluson lookalikes can improve the cosmetics and feel. Alternatively, if you're doing a lot of behind the nut string-bending tricks, you may want to consider modernising with some diecast staggered-post tuners. These will enable you to ditch string trees and thereby reduce friction, making bending easier.

10 SWAP SADDLES FOR BETTER INTONATION

The presence of six individual saddles on the Stratocaster hints that Leo Fender understood that the three-saddle design has its limitations in terms of intonation. While six-saddle Teles are common these days, many prefer the tone of the old brass- and steel-barrel saddles, so to keep things intonated properly, get some compensated units. We're big fans of the Gotoh In-Tunes in solid brass (g-gotoh.com).

LOVE YOUR LES PAUL



1 REMOVE YOUR PICKUP COVERS

This is one of the earliest modifications players performed on their humbucker-equipped Gibsons. It was generally thought at the time that removing the covers made the pickups sound louder. In fact, players who removed their covers were probably just hearing a little more treble, because the capacitive effect of the covers caused high-frequency roll-off. Loose covers can also be a cause of microphonic feedback. Vintage nickel-silver covers were very thin and kept treble loss to a minimum, but later covers – especially thick brass ones – did the upper frequency response no favours.

2 GET A NEW JACK PLATE

Every guitar design has its weak spots and the jack plate is the Les Paul's – because the slim plastic plate is all too easy to snap. The solution to this dilemma is simple, however: fit a metal replacement. This is a cheap and reversible modification, but try to ensure the screw holes of the new plate will line up with the old one. If you want to keep the original look, simply install the plastic plate on top of the metal one.

3 THE PETER GREEN MOD

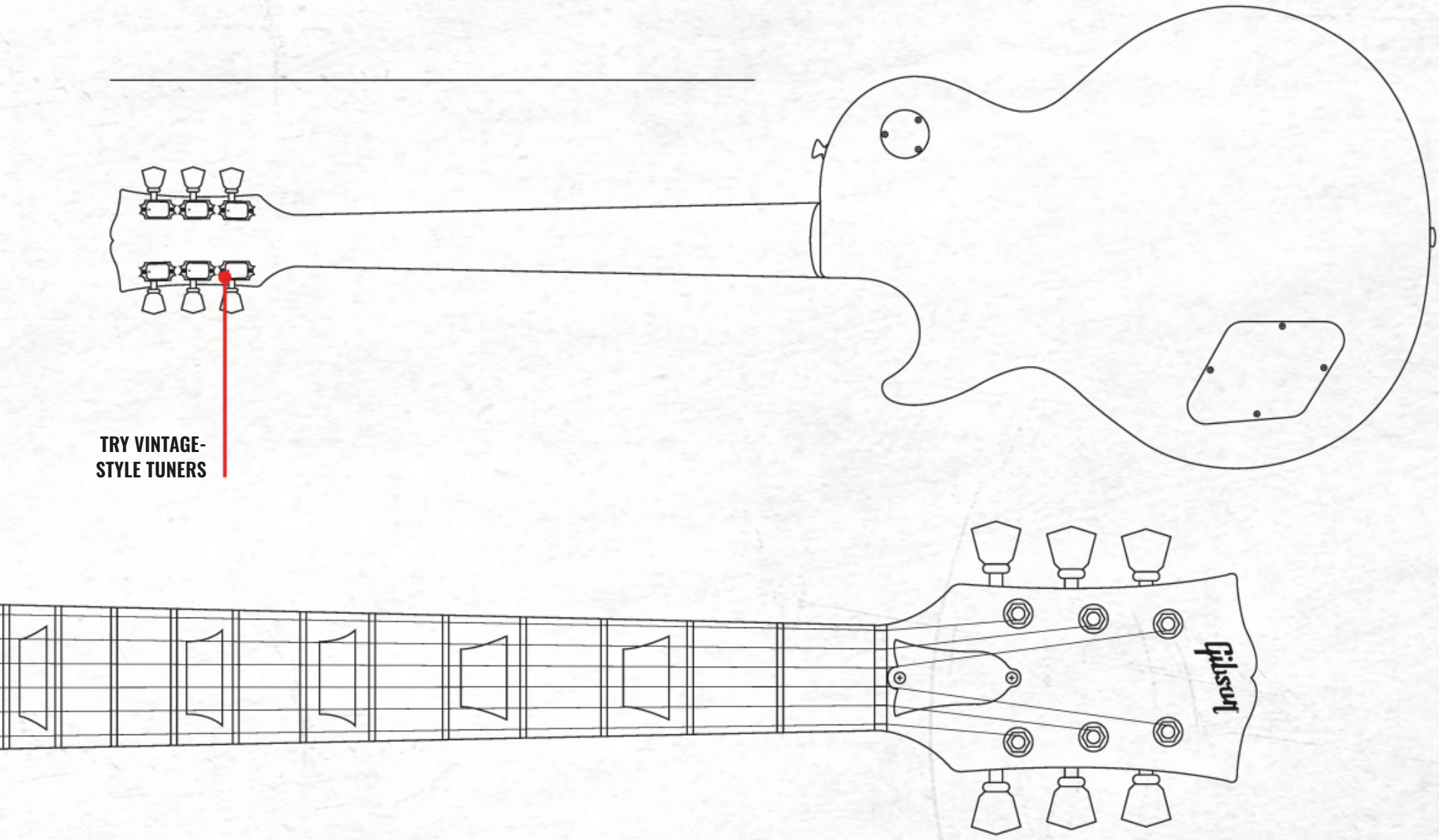
During his time with Fleetwood Mac, Peter Green's Les Paul had a very distinctive sound in the middle position. There are two ways you can replicate this. After removing the cover of one pickup (we'd suggest the neck), slacken off the baseplate, slide out the magnet then flip it around (not over) to reverse the magnetic polarity relative to the coil. Tighten the baseplate up, refit your cover if you use one, and you're done. Alternatively, you can flip the phase electronically by reversing the hot and cold connections.

4 BECOME A TOP WRAPPER

In addition to providing an anchor point for the strings, the stop tailpiece ensures that the strings have a suitable break-angle over the saddles. However, when the tailpiece is screwed tight to the body, the angle might be too sharp, increasing the chances of string breakage. One solution is to feed the strings through the tailpiece from the pickup side and wrap them over the top of the tailpiece. Proponents – among them Joe Bonamassa – claim that you get the tonal benefits of tailpiece-to-body contact coupled with more sustain and a slinkier playing feel, akin to swapping a set of 11s for a set of 10.5s.

5 TRY 50S-STYLE WIRING

If you own a soldering iron, this is one of the simplest and cheapest mods around. They call it '50s wiring' because it's the way Gibson hooked things up until around 1962 and the only actual difference was that the company connected the tone control to the output (middle) tag of the volume control rather than the input (outer) tag. This means you can turn down your volume control without the sound muddying up quite so much, and the volume and tone controls also become more interactive.



6 SWAP YOUR TAILPIECE

In the 1950s, Gibson's stop tailpiece was originally made from aluminium. Later on, this changed to zinc, which remains stock on many current models. Some players claim aluminium gives extra woodiness and more treble with a wider dynamic range, while zinc fans argue that their preferred metal has more low end and sustain. You can get a lightweight aluminium one for around £30, so do the Pepsi Challenge.

7 INSTALL NO-LOAD TONE POTS

A lack of clarity and treble is a common Les Paul complaint, but if you don't want to change your pickups, you can still get some of that treble back when you need it. With any tone control, there's always some treble bleed through the tone circuit – you can test this and see for yourself by disconnecting the tone circuit from the volume control. So try a 'no load' tone pot, which will enable you to eliminate the pot from circuit at the twist of a knob, and thus eliminate treble bleed? You can buy them or even make your own, and you'll notice the biggest difference in the neck position.

8 LOCK DOWN YOUR TAILPIECE

Traditional tailpiece studs do not grip stop tailpieces at all – the only thing holding the tailpiece in position is the pull of the strings. Often, you'll see tailpieces tilting forward, and it's claimed that better tone can be achieved by fixing the tailpiece more securely. TonePros (tonepros.com) and Faber (faberguitars.com) both offer retrofit means of getting your studs to grip.

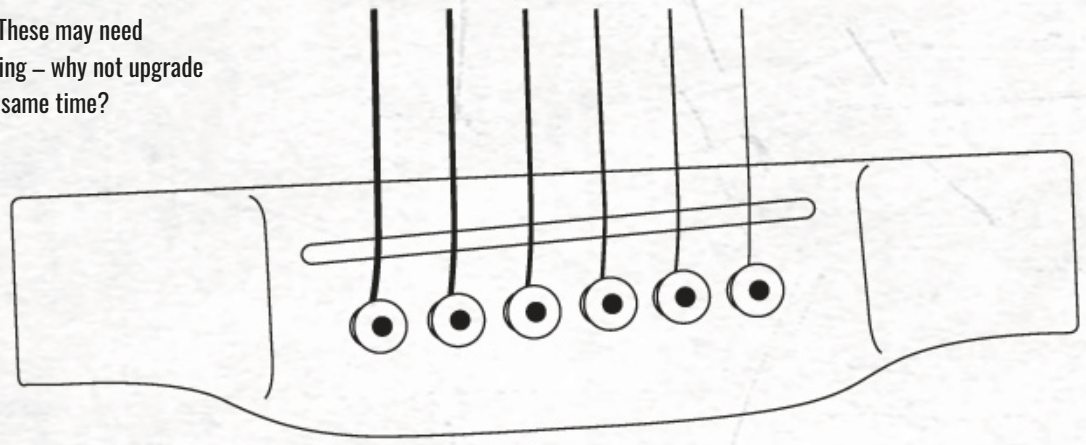
9 GO NYLON

1950s Les Pauls sported nylon nuts. While a vintage-accurate 6/6-grade nylon nut is expensive, you could always try it at the other end. To minimise rattle and vibrations, Gibson was using nylon saddles on several models by the mid 1960s. These days, you can easily try swapping out your saddles – it's an affordable and reversible mod. Reducing friction is always a good idea if your Les Paul has a Bigsby, while nylon saddles also have a softer attack and sweeter high end than brass or steel. Some players – Mr Bonamassa included – have been known to try a half rice/half chips approach with metal saddles for the wound strings and nylon for the plain strings. Experiment!

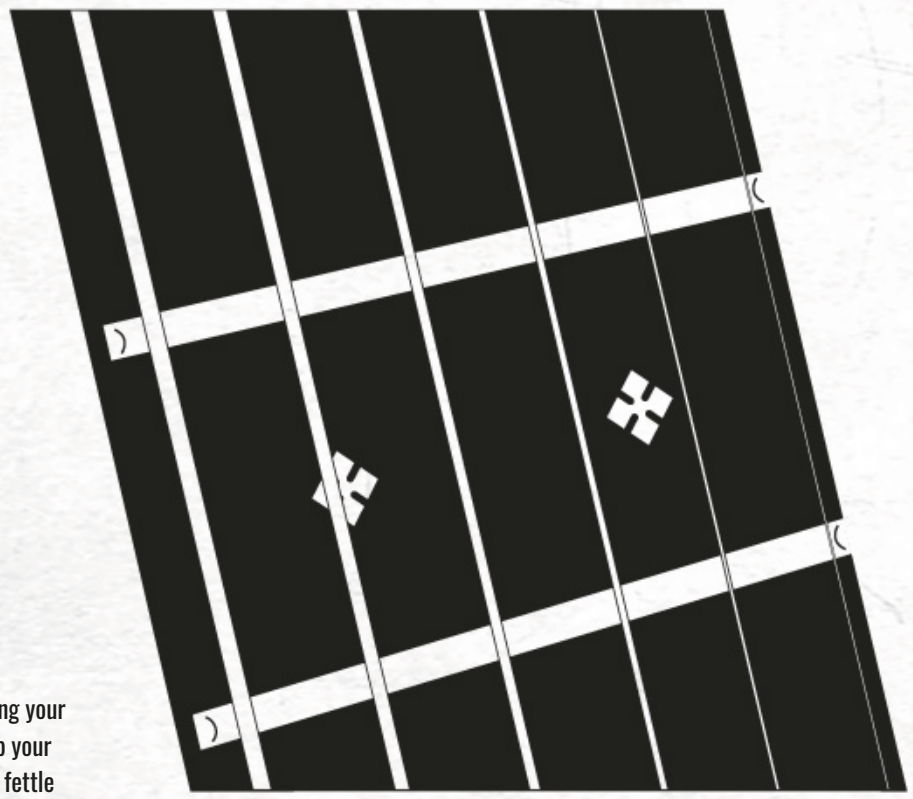
10 GIVE US A KLUSON

Most original Bursts associated with big-name players have diecast tuners – with the exception of Billy Gibbons' Pearly Gates. Taking a Black & Decker to the headstock of a vintage LP may seem horrific nowadays, but diecast tuners require wider holes than Klusons and players were more concerned with keeping their guitars in tune than originality. Increased mass at the headstock may have enhanced sustain, too. Nowadays, players are equally likely to retrofit vintage-style tuners, but you'll need conversion bushes to do it. You'll get vintage looks and livelier dynamics – and, contrary to vintage lore, decent Kluson-style tuners hold their tuning just as well as diecasts.

OVERHAUL YOUR ACOUSTIC



PINS These may need replacing – why not upgrade at the same time?



FRETBOARD Cleaning your fingerboard will keep your acoustic tone in fine fettle

1 EXPERIMENT WITH PINS

After hundreds of restringing cycles, bridge pins can show signs of wear. For optimum tone and stable tuning, it's essential that strings are firmly anchored at the ball end and if you're noticing pins creeping upwards when strings are tuned to full tension, it might be time to consider pin replacement. But be warned, because it might be that the string holes in the bridge are getting a bit worn, too, and new pins won't necessarily fix that.

When shopping for pins, you might consider an upgrade – especially if the originals are plastic. For instance, a set of ebony pins might smooth brash treble, bone pins may provide extra brightness and complexity, while brass may enhance body, sustain and harmonic overtones.

Vintage-style Martin pegs may not have string grooves cut into them, however the vast majority will, and the groove should be oriented towards the bridge for the string to sit in the channel. The pins should not necessarily sit flush with the top of the bridge and never try to force them all the way in if it's a tight fit, because you risk splitting the bridge. When replacing pins, measure the diameter of the originals to establish the size and taper you need and have fun with this cheap and easy modification.

2 CLEAN YOUR 'BOARD

Many modern acoustics come with Richlite fingerboards, a man-made material comprised of resin-infused paper. With its uniform jet-black appearance, it's a dead ringer for ebony and some believe it could eventually replace ebony in large-scale guitar production. Like wood, Richlite can get dirty, but it's easy to clean. Wipe it down with a soft damp cloth and avoiding the use of chemicals and fingerboard conditioners.

If your fingerboard is rosewood or ebony, it will benefit from being cleaned periodically. Finger grease, dead skin and goodness knows what else can build up and become impacted, which makes it harder to remove. Some prefer to start by scraping off the dirt using the edge of a credit card or even a Stanley blade scraper, but it's best to avoid the latter unless you are experienced and skilled.

Others eschew scraping and wipe the fingerboard down with naphtha (aka lighter fluid) squirted onto kitchen paper. It takes longer, but it will lift off the detritus without removing any wood. Some warn that naphtha can damage the finish and dry out the wood, but we've never experienced anything untoward with nitrocellulose finishes.

The gentlest way to get the detritus off is to use a specialist fingerboard cleaner such as Dunlop Fretboard 65 Ultimate Lemon Oil. You can also apply it after cleaning with naphtha to prevent the 'board from drying out. Simply wipe it on, allow it to sink into the wood for several minutes, then wipe off the excess and buff up the 'board with a clean cloth. Cleaning of this sort shouldn't be necessary at every string change and two or three times per year will probably suffice.

3 TRY DIFFERENT STRINGS

Don't allow yourself to get hung up on using the same type of strings on every acoustic. With such a range of tonewoods, body sizes and bracing styles, it would be tantamount to using just one type of pickup on every electric guitar, irrespective of body style, shape or size. There are plenty of gauges, alloys and coatings to consider, so have fun discovering what works for you and your guitar.

However, it's key to understand that the strings must be suitable for the guitar. With electrics, you can use any gauge (within reason) and the only compromises will be tone and playability. With acoustic guitars, there are structural considerations that should guide your choice.

For instance, vintage-style Martins with scalloped bracing are not designed to withstand the tension of extremely heavy strings and even 0.012-gauge sets could be pushing it. You may observe the area behind the bridge bulging upwards, which is sometimes referred to as a 'belly'. Some bellying is normal and indeed preferable; however, bellying as a result of excessive string pull will raise the bridge and twist it forwards. String action will increase as a consequence and it may permanently distort the geometry of the guitar if you persist with heavy-gauge strings.

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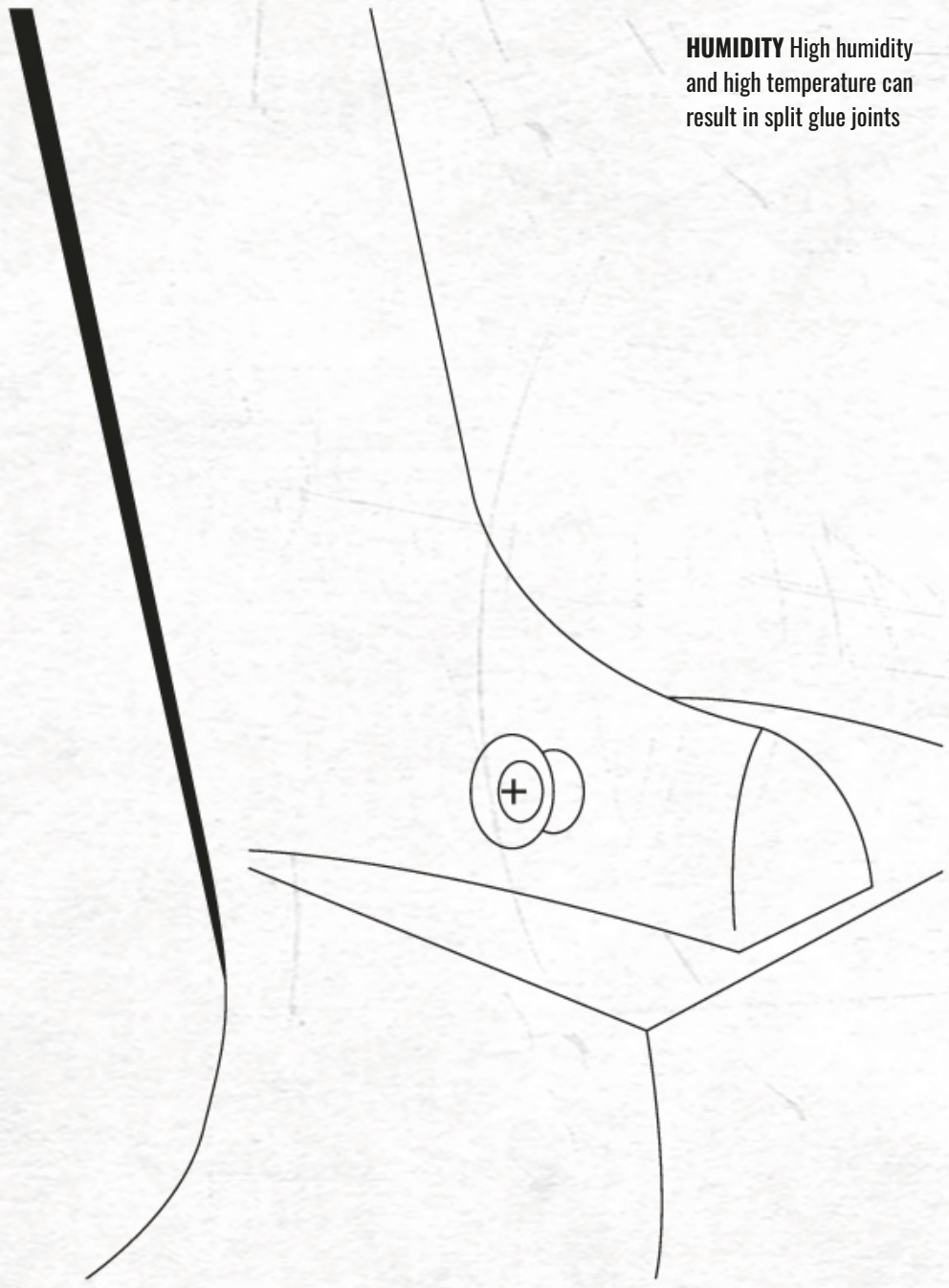


HUMIDITY High humidity and high temperature can result in split glue joints

Conversely, the more robustly constructed acoustics with non-scalloped bracing may lack volume and projection if a string set is too light. Sometimes, a heavier set will drive the top harder and help to bring out a guitar's voice. Also remember scale length – the OM scale is longer than the 000 scale, for example – so you and your guitar may be fine going up a gauge with a shorter scale length.

4 THINK ABOUT HUMIDITY

All wood has moisture content and it shrinks and expands as it dries out and rehydrates. When guitars get very dry, the shrinkage can be sufficient to crack the wood. Clearly, it's desirable to avoid cracks so care must be taken with solid wood guitars to prevent them from drying out.

If possible, maintain your guitar's humidity level between 45 and 55 percent within a temperature range of 22-25 degrees Celsius. Rapid temperature changes are bad news, so if you fly with your guitar or bring it indoors after it has been in a freezing van all night, allow it to come up to room temperature slowly before opening the case.

Too much humidity increases the wood's moisture content, which causes it to expand. Over-hydrated wood may not sound its best but in isolation, a high moisture content shouldn't be an issue. When very high humidity is combined with high temperature, glue joints can become weakened and even open slightly.

Much of this is common sense and few would consider it wise to keep an acoustic guitar next to a radiator, an electric heater, an open fire or wood-burning stove – that's just cruel. Rapid humidity changes are as undesirable as temperature extremes because the rate of moisture loss will not be consistent, which increases the danger of cracks opening and joints failing.

Fortunately, specialist guitar humidifiers are readily available and very affordable. Martin and Taylor both market their own and they're all designed for the same purpose – you simply need to follow the instructions. If you do need to re-humidify an instrument, it might be best to do so with the guitar sealed in its case.

5 KEEP YOUR FINISH CLEAN

Although the factory-aged look has now made inroads into the world of acoustics, there's nothing nice about picking up an acoustic covered in gunk. Acoustic-guitar cleaning should begin by removing dust or potentially abrasive particles from the finish using a brush or a soft dry cloth. Once everything has been removed, you can think about polishing or cleaning the finish. In a sense, the two are different, so let's make the distinction.

Some finishes are porous and over time, grease and dirt can get into the finish to make it look dull or cloudy. In more extreme cases, this type of ingress on the back of the neck can create a tacky feel that seems to get worse after you've been playing for a while. Any cleaning process should focus on removing this to restore the look and feel of the guitar.

Sometimes, the dirt will simply be confined to the outer surface of the finish, so polishing the finish might be deemed sufficient rather than a deep clean. However, beware of matt and satin finishes – because polishing them can result in a blotchy and uneven sheen. With finishes of this sort, polishing should be avoided.

Before cleaning or polishing your guitar, it's worth finding out what type of finish it has because certain cleaning products may harm it. As a general rule of thumb, all abrasives should be avoided, irrespective of the type of finish.

If your guitar has a shiny and thick gloss coating of polyurethane, polyester or epoxy, it will probably outlast the guitar. Since it's pretty much impervious, you can buff it up with any old spray polish you might find in the cupboard and a soft cotton cloth.

For guitars with nitrocellulose finishes, more care needs to be taken because it's porous. Some cleaning products can impregnate the finish and stay there after you have buffed off the excess. Although they're more expensive, specialist guitar polishes and cleaners are probably your safest bet. Another generally accepted recommendation is to avoid cleaning products that contain silicone. We've had success with Virtuoso Premium Cleaner and Premium Polish in the past (virtuosopolish.com).

REFINE YOUR THINLINE

1 KILL FEEDBACK – CHANGE YOUR SPEAKER

With more and more venues insisting on whisper-quiet stage levels, it makes low-wattage amplifiers and feedback-prone guitars with unpotted pickups more viable for gigging than they've been in decades. When stacks were king, even centre-block-equipped guitars such as the ES-335 could be problematic.

F-holes stuffed with rags or foam are probably less necessary these days, but something that's relatively unexplored is how the resonance frequency of individual speakers can impact on the onset of feedback. While auditioning speakers for a bespoke amp build, we noticed that two ostensibly similar alnico-magnet, 12-inch drivers – the Celestion Blue and the Warehouse Black & Blue – interacted with the guitar very differently.

Feedback happened a lot sooner with the Warehouse speaker, to the extent that our ES-335 started to behave more like an ES-330 and was hard to control. The reason is almost certainly that the resonance frequency of the Warehouse (106.73Hz) is in the low-midrange danger zone that tends to promote feedback with a semi, while the Celestion's lower 75Hz rating is safely out of harm's way.

As ever, it's about the way your guitar, amplifier and speaker interact: you might find that a speaker with a higher resonance frequency adds punch to a Telecaster. If feedback is a problem when using your semi at volume, trying swapping your speaker for a driver with a lower resonance frequency rating before giving up on your guitar or amp.

2 LEARN TO USE YOUR CONTROLS

Here's a 'mod' that's completely free and takes no time at all: learn to get the best out of your guitar's onboard controls first before contemplating a pickup change. While almost everyone reading this will be familiar with rolling back the tone with gain to nail Clapton's 'woman' tone, there's another cool trick that works particularly well with an ES-335. In order to add depth to the bridge-pickup tone while retaining bite, first flip your pickup-selector switch to the middle position. Then roll the neck-pickup volume back a couple of notches, stopping at the point at which you hear the neck pickup's bass end shelve off. The result? You'll get a thicker version of your bridge-pickup tone without any flab – it's a fantastic rhythm sound that works particularly well for filling space in a live mix if you are the only electric guitarist in a band.

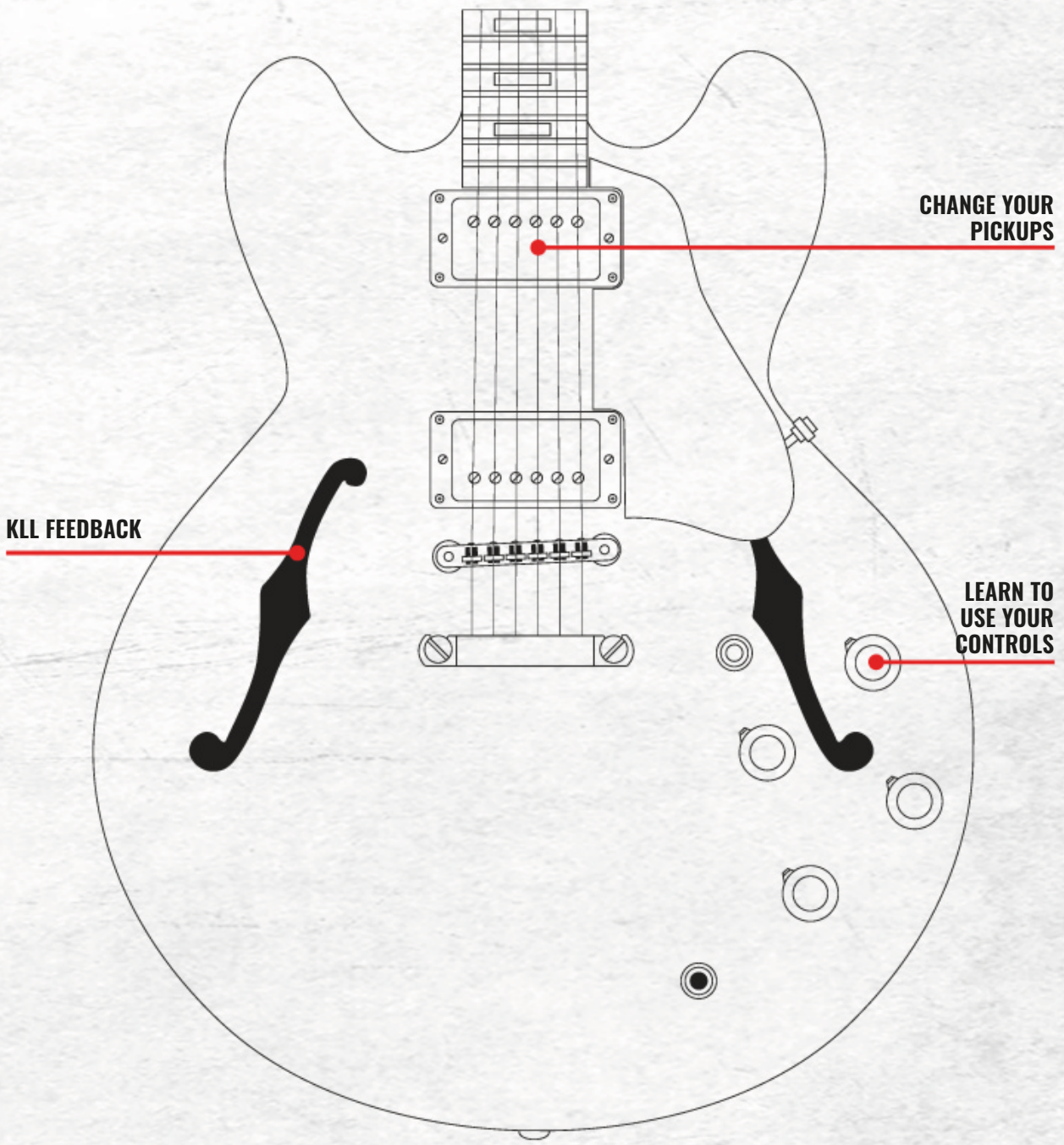
Vintage Trouble's Nalle Colt is primarily a Les Paul guy, but his advice is transferable for players who use vintage-style ES-335s: "I ride the volume control a lot, that's my whole thing. Since we started this band, I've liked to get kind of a gritty amp and then just turn down to get it to clean up. There's something so nice when you hear that volume go up and it just feels and sounds natural.

"[For rhythm] I'm usually set about five and a half or six on a Les Paul, in the middle position. Then you can just turn down the bass pickup a little bit – it's amazing. The stuff you can do is incredible, there's a thousand sounds in it if you are willing to work at it. You've got to fight the adrenaline, as usually you get onstage and end up just flipping it to the bridge pickup, but you've gotta train yourself! For me, it came from watching Jimmy Page play so much, he was the master of that."

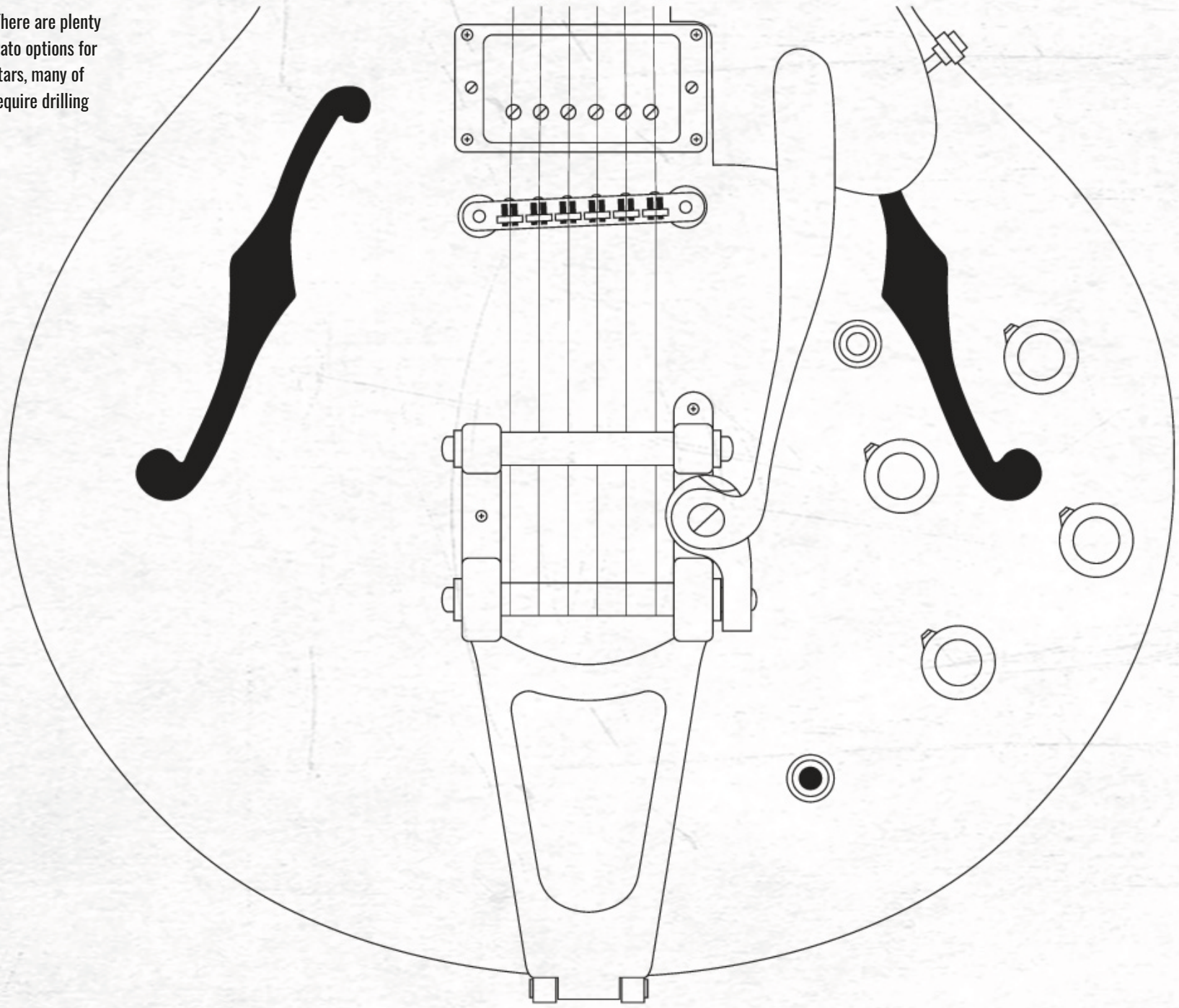
3 KEEP YOUR NUT SLIPPY

We're not going to make many friends at retrofit-tuner companies now, but honestly, the majority of tuning difficulties have very little to do with your machineheads and are likely down to friction at the nut or bridge – you'll often hear a tell-tale 'ping' when tuning if a string is binding in the nut. This can be eased with a lubricant such as Big Bends Nut Sauce, or cheap and cheerful pencil graphite.

The choice of nut material itself is also worthy of consideration. As previously stated, nylon was Gibson's nut material of choice back in the day, while unbleached bone is the preferred choice for many contemporary luthiers. Aside from benefits to tone, sustain and tuning stability, it's also mildly self-lubricating and porous, so it absorbs any additional lube you apply and stays slippery, reducing friction. Most bone



REFINE YOUR THINLINE continued



BIGSBY B7 There are plenty of Bigsby vibrato options for 335-style guitars, many of which don't require drilling

used in the guitar industry is a by-product of animal farming – cruelty-free alternatives include Micarta (a compound of phenolic resins) and Tusq (a man-made alternative to ivory).

4 GET WOBBLE WITHOUT DRILLING

A Bigsby B3 or B6 doesn't have a tension bar, so you don't need to drill into the arched top of your beloved instrument for vintage-whammy fun. However, due to a very shallow break angle across the saddles, neither option creates much downward pressure on the bridge and you'll need to think about relocating the ground wire.

With the addition of a Towner Down Tension Bar (townerusa.com) you can create a stop-bar-like break angle over the bridge, but still get smooth Bigsby performance thanks to the Towner's roller bar. And you won't need to worry about the ground wire, as the Towner hooks onto your existing tailpiece studs, which you can adjust to taste. It's an ingenious 'best of both worlds' solution. If you want to install a Bigsby B7 on your ES-335 without leaving any trace or having to reroute the ground wire, then Vibramate's V7-335 kit (vibramate.com) doesn't require any drilling thanks to its system of mounting plates. The Vibramate hardware does add a little weight and there's a subtle colouration of the tone compared to a B7 that's been screwed directly into the body, but it's a great way to audition a Bigsby without creating sawdust.

For an alternative ES-335 vibrato option that doesn't require drilling and has a different feel to a Bigsby, check out the Stetsbar (stetsbar.com) or Duesenberg Les Trem (duesenberg.de).

5 OKAY THEN, CHANGE YOUR PICKUPS

If you've tried everything and your ES-335 is playing like a dream but still doesn't cut it when you plug in, a pickup change could be in order. Retrofit pickups aren't a silver bullet for all of your tonal ills – you might find that a very good set of pickups throws the shortcomings of your guitar into sharper focus in the same way that a high-quality microphone will only accentuate the imperfections in a dubious vocal performance – but if you feel like your pickups are constricting or strangling your guitar's natural voice, then there's never been more choice when it comes to replacements.

Early ES-335s came loaded with PAF humbuckers and the extended high-end, touch-sensitivity and harmonic content offered by a really good set of PAF-style units can be a revelation. Assuming you don't want to drop second-hand-car money on a set of vintage Gibson humbuckers, you won't go far wrong with Monty's PAFs (montysguitars.com), Tyson Tone's The Preachers (tysontone.com), Mojo Pickups 'Vintage' PAFs (mojopickups.co.uk), Lollar Low Wind Imperials (lollarguitars.com) or a set of Bare Knuckle's VHII units (bareknucklepickups.co.uk). G

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DOWN TO THE WIRE

Nirvana, Foo Fighters and Brandi Carlile are just three of the huge acts for whom Earnie Bailey has toured the world as a guitar tech. He also builds stellar electric guitars and stompboxes under the Wire Instruments monicker. Here, Earnie tells us how it all began, dispenses some sage advice and talks us through some of his career highlights…

INTERVIEW CHRIS VINNICOMBE

ABOVE Earnie in his workshop with a Wire Instruments Concorde VI

OPPOSITE TOP Earnie's 'office', stageside with Brandi Carlile

OPPOSITE Dave Grohl and David Bowie during Bowie's 50th Birthday Celebration Concert in 1997 at Madison Square Garden – one of Earnie's all-time favourite gigs

How did you become a guitar tech in the first place?

"As a teenager in the late 1970s, I was living in a rural setting without much in the way of distractions when I bought my first electric guitar. Realising learning to make chords was going to be slow and challenging, I decided to completely dismantle and reassemble my Ibanez Destroyer. In the process, I learned much of how it worked and gained a basic understanding of what could be adjusted and how those details could make the instrument easier to play.

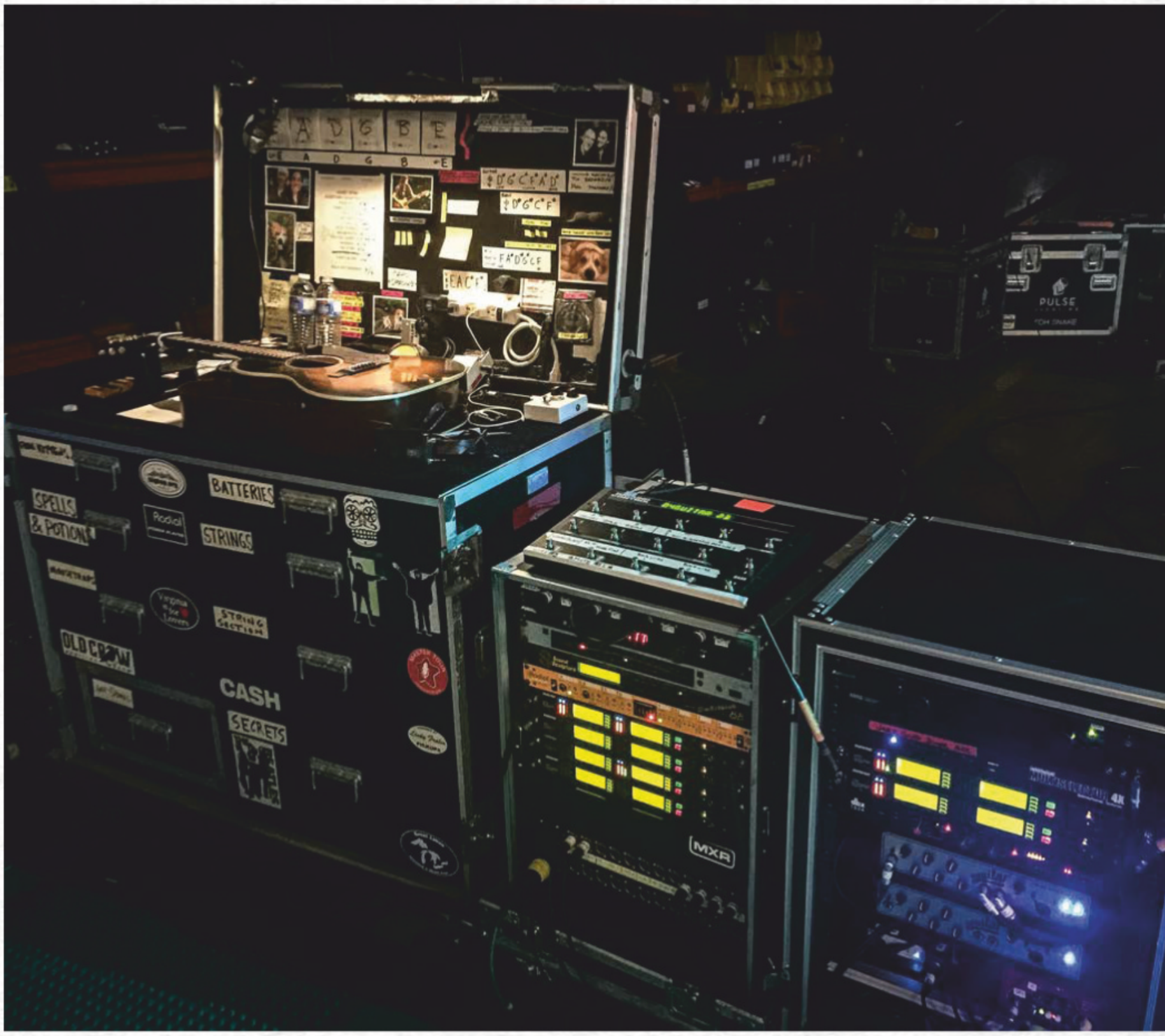
"I discovered the public library in our town had stacks of *Guitar Player* magazines which featured articles about mods and repair work, as well as a column by Craig Anderton on how to build your own pedals. So in addition to those resources, I sent in an order for Anderton's book, and began the process of writing letters to guitar companies requesting literature as a means to learn more about construction concepts and what was going on with all those switches and preamps, which were a popular feature at the time.

"That progressed into fixing and setting up my friends' guitars, and from there I began to take a Greyhound bus to the city 90 miles away on the weekends to hang out in a guitar-repair shop and pester a craftsman named John Saba with endless questions about the kinds of work they did. He was patient and willing to share his knowledge and would send me off with a grocery bag full of random guitar parts. Using those, I was able to make my first attempts at guitar making in high-school woodshop class. Soon after that, I wound up moving to the city and getting a job at the repair shop while going to college. After receiving a degree in visual arts, I decided I was far more interested in working on guitars, and stayed with it.

"A decade later, I was living in Seattle doing a fair amount of repair and restoration work on guitars and amps, when I was given the opportunity to work for Nirvana. So out of the blue, my occupation went from being conducted in a small workshop, to doing repair work in hotels, buses, theatres, stadiums and recording studios. The schedules were demanding and the experiences at times profound, witnessing history as well as providing a useful minor role within it."

How has a history of repairing guitars informed your approach to guitar building?

"The foundation in repair work appears in most of the detail areas. Fragile adornments are absent,



replaced by more industrial design elements harnessed alongside fundamental utility.

"Primarily, it taught me to build with the notion that your imagination gets to run wild, right after you wring out the engineering. The R&D team at Fender in the 1950s did so many things right in their modular approach to building the electric solidbody, while making the instruments easy to service and very roadworthy. These are the intelligent design elements you quickly grow to appreciate doing set-ups and repair jobs."

What's the number-one show-saving item that people should carry in their gigbags?

"In my experience, a soldering iron and a knowledge of electronic repair has been most helpful in keeping a performance from being cancelled. If that's not where you want to spend your time honing your skills, having spare cables, pedals, strings and a small backup amp are likely to cover most unexpected situations."

What's your top tip for tuning stability?

"Good winding and wrapping technique when installing a new set of strings. There are a few ways to

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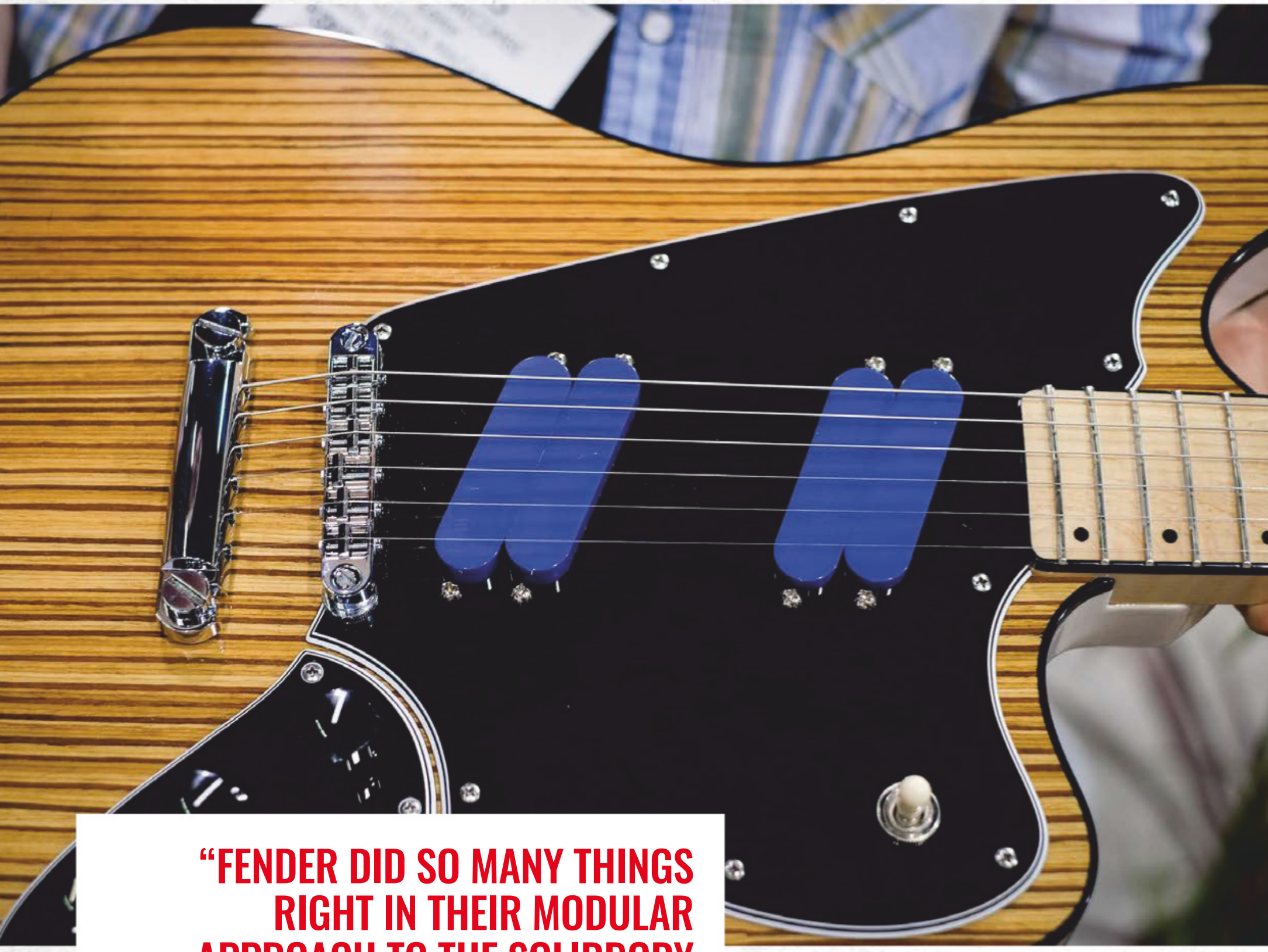

"FENDER DID SO MANY THINGS RIGHT IN THEIR MODULAR APPROACH TO THE SOLIDBODY ELECTRIC, MAKING INSTRUMENTS EASY TO SERVICE AND ROADWORTHY"

ABOVE A Wire Instruments DC9 with bound zebrawood top on the Reverb booth at NAMM 2018

RIGHT A Wire Instruments Supercollider in honey amber over spalted maple, also at NAMM 2018

make a big difference at the tuning heads, although it's easier explained with a visual lesson. Another thing I often see is enclosed tuner bushings that become loose after the finish on a new guitar has had a year to shrink after they were put on tight at the factory. Getting these snug without over-tightening will make a difference in stability.

"A close second and third are thorough string stretching with some transient-attack picking, followed by always tuning from flat up to the note. From sharp down to the note is prone to tuning failure, as unreleased or hanging tension waiting at the contact points – the nut, bridge, string trees – often gives way while playing."

How has the role of live guitar tech changed?

"For starters, we now have workstations that provide an organised and a familiar workspace. It's super-helpful when the need for quick thinking and

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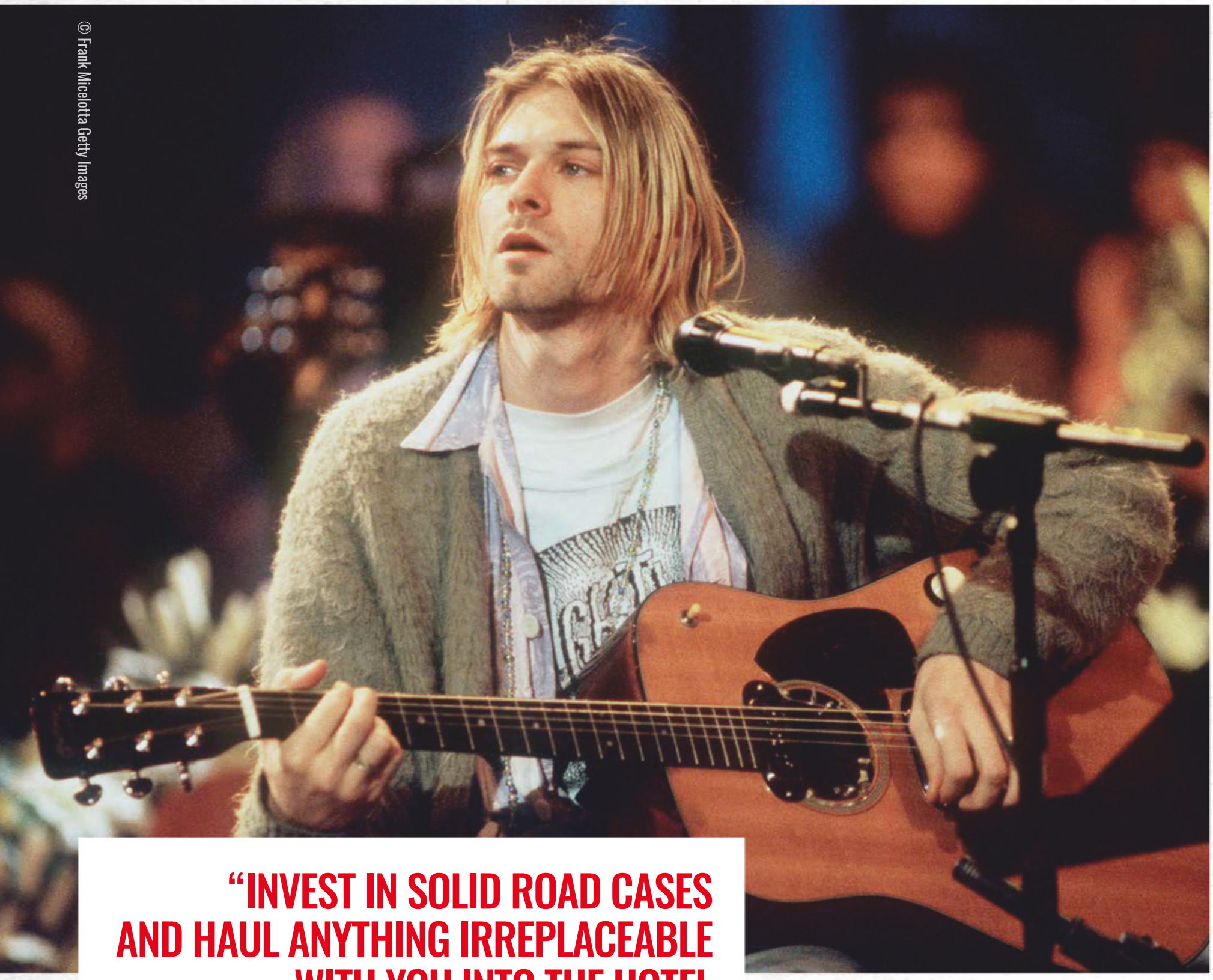

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ABOVE Kurt Cobain of Nirvana during the taping of MTV Unplugged at Sony Studios in New York City – another historic performance at which Earnie was stage-side

"INVEST IN SOLID ROAD CASES AND HAUL ANYTHING IRREPLACEABLE WITH YOU INTO THE HOTEL ROOM IF YOU DON'T HAVE SOMEONE GUARDING THE EQUIPMENT"

troubleshooting arrives in pairs. We're also living in the golden age of very well-built guitars, amps and pedals. Pedalboards have also become more substantial and are not only an area that requires more knowledge, but a real area of concern in a live setting based on the amount of connections, points of compromise and exposure to the elements.

"Wireless has come a long way compared to 40 years ago – and today's touring systems involve MIDI switching and routing, tidy cable looms, et cetera. It's more to think about and keep your attention on, but allows so much more freedom for the performer."

Over the years, what have been the most fun gigs to watch from the side of the stage?

"My shortlist would include Nirvana *Unplugged In New York* and their shows in São Paulo in Brazil, the Roseland Ballroom, New York in July of 1993 and the 1992 MTV Music Awards. Brandi Carlile at the 2019 Grammy Awards – otherworldly talent and raw power, taking nothing for granted and leaving one tough audience speechless. Radiohead performing *Paranoid Android* on the Jools Holland show in 1997. I don't have words for how incredible this was to witness first-hand. And David Bowie's 50th birthday at Madison Square Garden."

Is there one pearl of wisdom you'd offer that will help people's gear survive a tour?

"Invest in solid road cases, and haul anything irreplaceable with you into the hotel room if you don't have someone guarding the equipment."

Finally, what's next? More guitars? More tours?

"Yes, all of the above and staying busy on all fronts. It's been great fun getting back to building pedals and studying schematics is like scanning through cookbooks for ideas. They find homes as fast as I can build them and, like guitar-making, allow me to live in my artistic brain with the necessary structure to juggle multiple occupations." G

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RODRIGO Y GABRIELA

THE GUITAR INTERVIEW

Rodrigo y Gabriela might have sold a million albums and played a huge part in bringing nylon-string guitar back into the mainstream, but sometimes prosperity is the enemy of creativity. Rodrigo Sanchez and Gabriela Quintero spent the best part of four years labouring over their sixth long-player, but it just wasn't right. Last year, they decided to tear it all up, cast off the burden of expectation and create the album they truly wanted to make. We sit down with the duo to talk midlife crises, trusting your instincts and why success can be measured in coffee and cake…

WORDS JOSH GARDNER **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

If Rodrigo Sanchez and Gabriela Quintero wanted to feel like they were going up in the world, the ultra-modern offices of their new record label, BMG, would be a good place to start. It's been a long journey for Rodrigo y Gabriela from the their native Mexico City to relaxing on mid-century modern sofas while looking out over London's urban sprawl far below, but it's a journey that's clearly at the forefront of the duo's minds as we sit down together.

"Today is exactly 20 years since we first landed in Ireland," Rodrigo says, disbelief palpable in his voice. "We wanted to make a living in music. We didn't know if that would come just through playing in bars – we didn't care, we just wanted to make music."

The pair are both in their 40s now, and have come a long way from busking on the streets of Dublin. Played the Royal Albert Hall? Tick. Performed for President Obama? Tick. Sold a million records? Tick. And yet it's clear the attitude the pair exhibited at the beginning is the root of their success.

"We were so focused," Rod affirms. "We'd practise six or seven hours a day trying to improve our technique and we started writing music without any expectations. But being so focused then, what does it tell you? It says that we weren't living in the past, we weren't living in the future, we were all about the present. And that presence opened up the door for what we are doing now."

STUNTED EVOLUTION

What they are doing are now is welcoming the arrival of their sixth studio album, the bold and experimental *Mettavolution*. It's been five years since the duo's last record, *9 Dead Alive*, but the extended hiatus wasn't necessarily intentional…

"We wanted to come out with the album earlier, like two and a half years ago, but we didn't have the music," Rod admits. "It actually took us until the last eight months to really come up with the songs for the album. We had a lot of material, but eventually everyone was very excited. It was a long process, but it finally felt like it was the right time, the right songs, and here we are!"

It's rare that an album takes such a long time to come together without there being some issues along the way, and finding the right tone and direction for the new record was a real stumbling block.

"After so many years of doing what we do… the way that you live your life, and the changes in the world, the economy… everything has to affect your creativity," Gabriela explains. "So for us, it was important to do something that was surprising for both of us, that was different to the previous works.

"When we finished the cycle of the *9 Dead Alive* album, we felt a little bit under pressure to come up with something that followed the trends. You hear about how the music industry has changed… and that can place a lot of pressure on your creativity.

"And so all of the things we wrote at first… we didn't know where to go with it. We didn't want to repeat ourselves. And so we got to a point where we spent maybe two years writing songs that were influenced by these comments.

"But then we decided… fuck it! We are what we are, we can't change what we are, so we're going to stick to our guns – if people like it, great, if they don't, then they don't. So we just gave up all these crazy ideas and then all the creativity started to flow naturally. We decided to write a *lot* of music and it was important not to think about an album as such, but just to make music – we had enough that we could have recorded three albums if we wanted!"

"It was a long process," Rod agrees. "But I think in general, it was a midlife… not crisis! But a transformation! We've both been practising different kinds of techniques to heighten our awareness – meditation and stuff like that – and that has helped a lot."

The transformation hasn't just been a metaphysical one, however – that newfound comfort and confidence in their own skin has had practical outcomes as well. "I stopped pursuing speed… I just don't care about it any more, y'know?" the fleet-fingered Rod exclaims. "I think that the personal

experiences that you go through – especially at my age! – should mirror how we develop in our music.

"And so I actually tried to change my way of playing, technically. I changed the size of my pick – I use a larger one now, because I'm doing a lot of funky stuff on the new album, funky rhythms, which felt better with a bigger pick."

HOME COMFORTS

Listening to *Mettavolution*, it's clear that choosing to remain true to who they are hasn't left the duo adrift in a sea of nostalgia and repetition, and in fact it gave them the confidence to step out of their comfort zone – literally.

"We're neighbours, and we have a studio in the same neighbourhood, so we go there every day – every single day!" Gab says, explaining the way the pair have written on the last few albums. "Our way to hang out together is to play! So we had actually started to record the album in our studio, and were trying to experiment there… but there was just this moment where we thought, 'We're doing the same thing in the same place in the same way as the last two albums.'"

As the frustration built up, their manager made a controversial suggestion – maybe the pair should try working with a producer for the first time? "We were like, 'NOOOO!' Because it felt unnatural, and it felt wrong," Gab explains. "But then we thought that's why we *should* do it – to produce different results, we have to start doing things differently.

"So we talked to a lot of different and amazing producers, but we didn't feel like this extra little bit of connection. But then when we talked to Dave Sardy on the phone, we felt like we locked in and we had the same ideas and the same vibe."

Sardy – who has produced records for everyone from LCD Soundsystem to Marilyn Manson to Oasis – jumped onboard with the pair's plans to break from the norm, getting them out to Los Angeles to record much of the album's bedrock at Sunset Sound studios.

"Sunset has such great acoustics," Gab enthuses. "We recorded the structure of the album as if we were playing live – we even had a mini-stage and a PA and candles. And then we moved up to his studio in the Hollywood Hills to do some more bits and pieces and to try to do those different things that we talked about. We just wanted to think differently, and take risks with our sound… and it came out very naturally."

ELECTRIC SOUL

The risk-taking spirit meant finding new melodies and textures to accompany Rod and Gab's nylon-string core, which meant more use of electric guitars and electronic sounds than ever before. In Rod's case that meant bonding with a Fender Jaguar ("I absolutely fell in love with it") and thinking of some leftfield ways to uncover new melodies…"I wrote songs with actual lyrics, and then we worked on the instrumental versions of those, and that's how we got the melodic content," Rod explains. "I wanted to have different tones for the 'vocals' and for the 'chorus' and then the solos – and that's where I knew having effects and electric guitars was going to help.

"I use a Fractal live and in our studio, but we didn't use those with David, because he was unfamiliar with it. So instead, we recreated the sounds that we were using for the demos in the studio with his equipment.

"We also used a lot of different percussion… there's the case of a kick drum on there! We used Leslies and ran the guitars through it… honestly, I have a huge list that I asked the engineers to keep because I needed to remember it all!

"If I was going to record the album again tomorrow, I would probably use more! But for the time, it was the perfect amount."

The most striking example of this new approach is the album's second side – a 19-minute instrumental cover of the Pink Floyd opus, *Echoes*.

"Rod started to come up with the idea of covering *Echoes*, not necessarily for the album, just to play live," Gab says of the decision to put this ambitious piece on the album.

> **"PEOPLE THINK WE CAN PLAY ANYTHING, THAT WE'RE VIRTUOSOS, BUT IT'S ALL VERY DIFFERENT! WE CAN'T PLAY EVERYTHING ON THE GUITAR – NOBODY CAN!"**

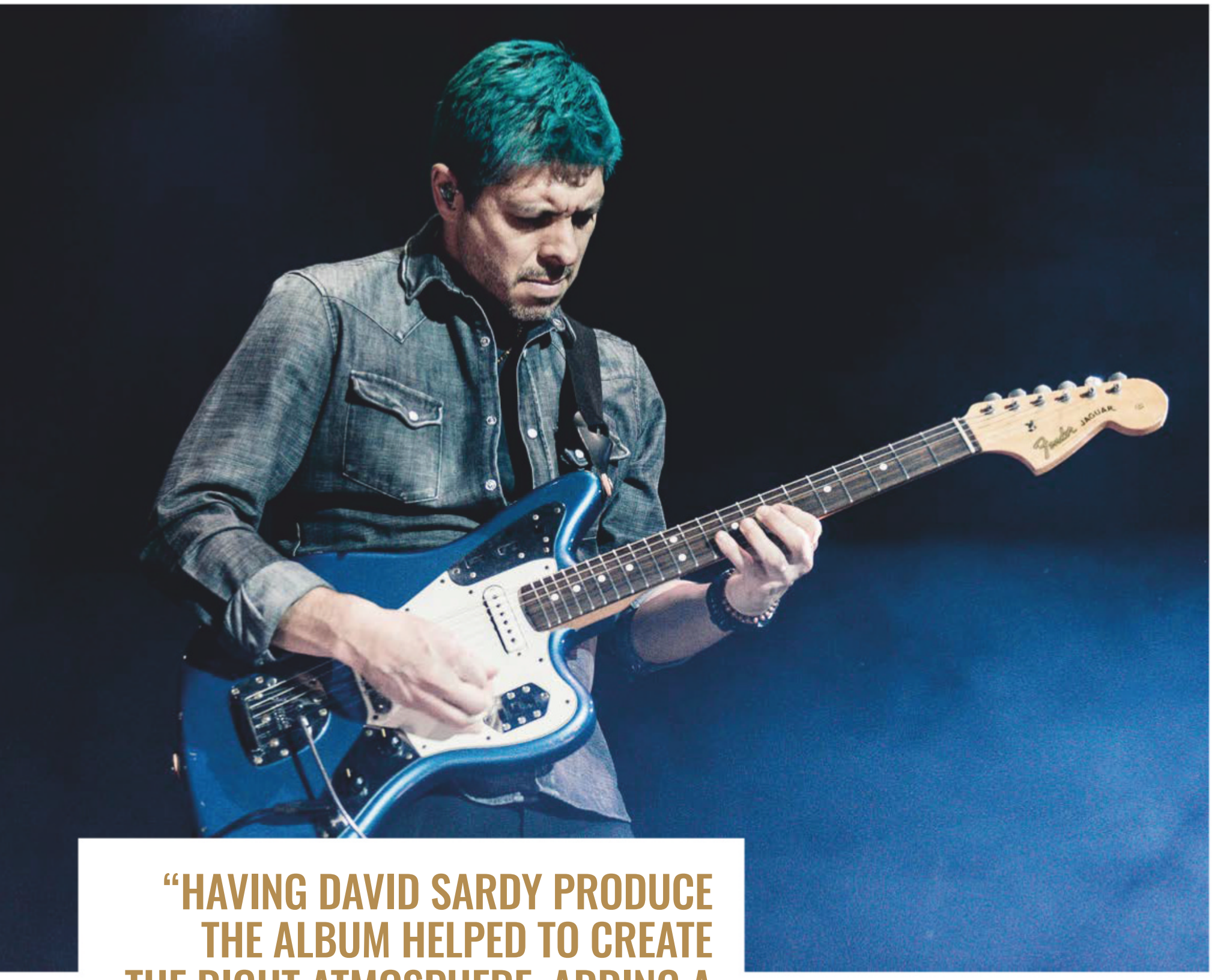
"So we had the whole track already worked out for two guitars. And so we said: 'Oh yes, let's just do it – let's just risk it!'

"It was obvious that what we had to do was deconstruct the way the actual song is, which is based on full-on electronics and all that," Rod adds. "The reality is, the simpler the better. We worked on several different versions and it was getting better every time we took some elements out of it.

"I guess having David Sardy produce the album helped to create the right atmosphere, adding a couple of electric guitar parts to create some harmonies here and there," Rod adds. "That gave it a different dimension, but it's still us, it's still two acoustic guitars."

FULL CIRCLE

Two acoustic guitars it might be, but it's a far cry from the stripped-down instrumental music the pair



"HAVING DAVID SARDY PRODUCE THE ALBUM HELPED TO CREATE THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE, ADDING A COUPLE OF ELECTRIC GUITAR PARTS TO CREATE SOME HARMONIES"

were playing when they burst onto the scene in the early 2000s with their eponymous, John Leckie-produced breakthrough album. We wonder if they could have imagined making music like this back in their busking days…

"Honestly, yes!" Gab enthuses. "Because when I'm in my head, I always have had a world of music that has no borders. I imagine things how they would sound with this or that. But also, people think that we can play anything on guitar, that we're virtuosos, but it's all very different! We can't play everything on the guitar – nobody can!

"When I started playing the guitar I used to play normal guitar! Like, fuckin' chords, riffs and solos and melodies and everything. Then over the years of playing in the band, I became very good at what I was doing, but that became a comfort zone… and so getting out of that, playing things that are actually simpler, was challenging! Like to go back and 'play the guitar' was difficult! But by bringing all those elements together, it creates an album that has a different colour.

"Rodrigo in his technique has also changed – he's practised playing with more rhythms and all the funky stuff, but there's a lot of practice behind that! We've always had it in our heads, but it takes time and work to get it out properly."

Working with David Sardy in LA clearly helped the pair get creative, leaving them with far too much material for one record. But despite the volume of tracks to choose from, cutting it down was a fairly simple process.

"We did a couple of tours shortly before we recorded, just to do that," Rod says. "Because we had so many songs, and we had to cut some of them off because we wanted a shorter album. These particular ones felt instinctively right. They flowed together, and they felt like the old days, but with new exciting material in our ears.

"This is the first album that we're going to play the full album every night. Because it's 40 minutes of music, and this is the first time where I don't have one song that I think is maybe a little bit out of context."

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NYLON STRONG

For 15 years, Rodrigo and Gabriela have been bringing their nylon-string sound to the world's most prestigious stages. But capturing the kinetic energy of the duo's recorded sound in large venues has always proved a problem. We spoke to the pair's guitar techs, Rob Allen and Tor Sørnes, about the unique challenges they face on the road…

The nuances of Rodrigo y Gabriela's sound have never been the most straightforward thing for a guitar tech to get their head around – from Rodrigo's tendency to throw effects at a classical instrument that wasn't even designed to be amplified, to capturing the percussive nature of Gabriela's playing, which requires a level of technological wizardry that is scarcely believable for one nylon-string instrument.

Tasked with keeping all this up and running are the pair's guitar techs Rob Allen and Tor Sørnes – and boy do they have their work cut out, especially as neither had a great deal of experience with nylon-strings beforehand. Tor, who joined the team in 2018, did some work with Norwegian outfit Jim Stärk, while Rob jokes that he "once volunteered to restring a music school's guitar collection, which consisted of about 20 classical guitars…" before he started working for Rod in 2012.

At the heart of everything are the pair's Yamaha guitars – the NTX for Rod and the NCX for Gab – which were created for them following an in-depth design process aimed at developing instruments that could cope with their unique requirements. Of the two, Gab's guitar has a reputation for being the most temperamental. It's not hard to see why…

"Gabriela has a complex system with five custom piezos from Yamaha and a Ukko piezo from B-Band [technically a contact drum mic – Ed] for the percussion part, and a B-Band under-saddle transducer for the string sound," Tor explains. "This the routed through two different preamps and comes out of the guitar as two different channels on the stereo-output barrel."

If that sounds like a lot of technology to put in one guitar, you're not wrong – but Rodrigo appreciates the R&D that Yamaha has put into making the pickups better and more streamlined over time.

"The latest upgrades are these super-thin, weightless transducers, which makes the guitars much lighter – especially Gab's guitar, because it used to have seven piezos!" he explains. "Now she can have tiny ones and there's no extra weight, they sound better and the system is simpler. Well, simpler to use – it's still very complex!"

When you're dealing with a touring band and a player as kinetic as Gabriela, however, that complexity does mean that her guitars

need a fair bit of TLC to keep them in good working order… "The fun part is performing maintenance and repair on all of this electronics without seeing what you're doing," Tor explains. "With an electric guitar, you can normally take the back cover off and have all of the electronics exposed, here there is only the soundhole… and you cover it when you stick your hand through the hole. This means it's actually impossible to actually see what you're doing inside!"

Rodrigo's setup offers a different challenge – his thinline NTX guitar has to work in tandem with a variety of onstage effects pedals, as well as Rod's Fractal Axe-Fx. Not necessarily tools that are designed to work together… "They actually work really well together," Rob clarifies. "On his pedalboard, there are no overdrives, as that is all done with the Fractal, so on the floor it's all the clean-friendly sounding pedals – chorus, delays, and so on." While once just used for a few songs in the set, the Fractal has become increasingly central to Rod's live sound, resulting in some changes to the setup. "On previous tours, we only used the Fractal for *Orion* and *Killing In The Name*, but it went to separate channels at front of house, so it could be blended with his clean sound." says Rob. "On this tour, Rod wanted it all in one line to give him more control of his sound, so it's all inline.

"He has about six presets on the Fractal which are basically amp and cab sims with maybe the odd effect thrown in and also a clean 'straight through' preset. It's basically replacing an amp and cab onstage, the equivalent of having a channel-switching amp with your 'clean' pedals plugged in the front of it. Then I have a duplicate controller board for it offstage, so I can change his patches for him when he's giving it the big one!"

OPPOSITE Rob Allen (left) and Tor Sørnes

TOP LEFT Maintaining acoustic electronics is a job done largely by feel

TOP RIGHT Gabriela's board is an exercise in simplicity...

ABOVE ...Rodrigo's, less so

RIGHT The tools of the trade

HUMILITY AND TRUST

With the troubled gestation of *Mettavolution* now receding into the distance, there's a palpable sense that Rodrigo and Gabriela have emerged re-energised and keenly aware of the lessons the process has taught them. "We always wanted to create new sounds and make something that was different to what everyone else did," Gab explains. "The core elements were there from the beginning, but at some point, I think we lost sight of that. And that was the big lesson – what we do and play comes from a very deep presence, so we like to be present.

"That's the way that it talks to people. And if we don't heed that element, it's funny, but it's hard to express it in a way people relate to. So the lesson is to have this humble attitude and to understand that we are in service of this music. That when we go out and play, when we step onto the stage, whether we are playing in front of two people, a hundred people or 2,000 people, that's the core of it."

Rod chimes in: "During the process we were showing the songs that we'd written to our manager, which we never do usually. And he was like, 'Alright, whatever… not memorable!' I thought he was picking on us, but he was just being honest."

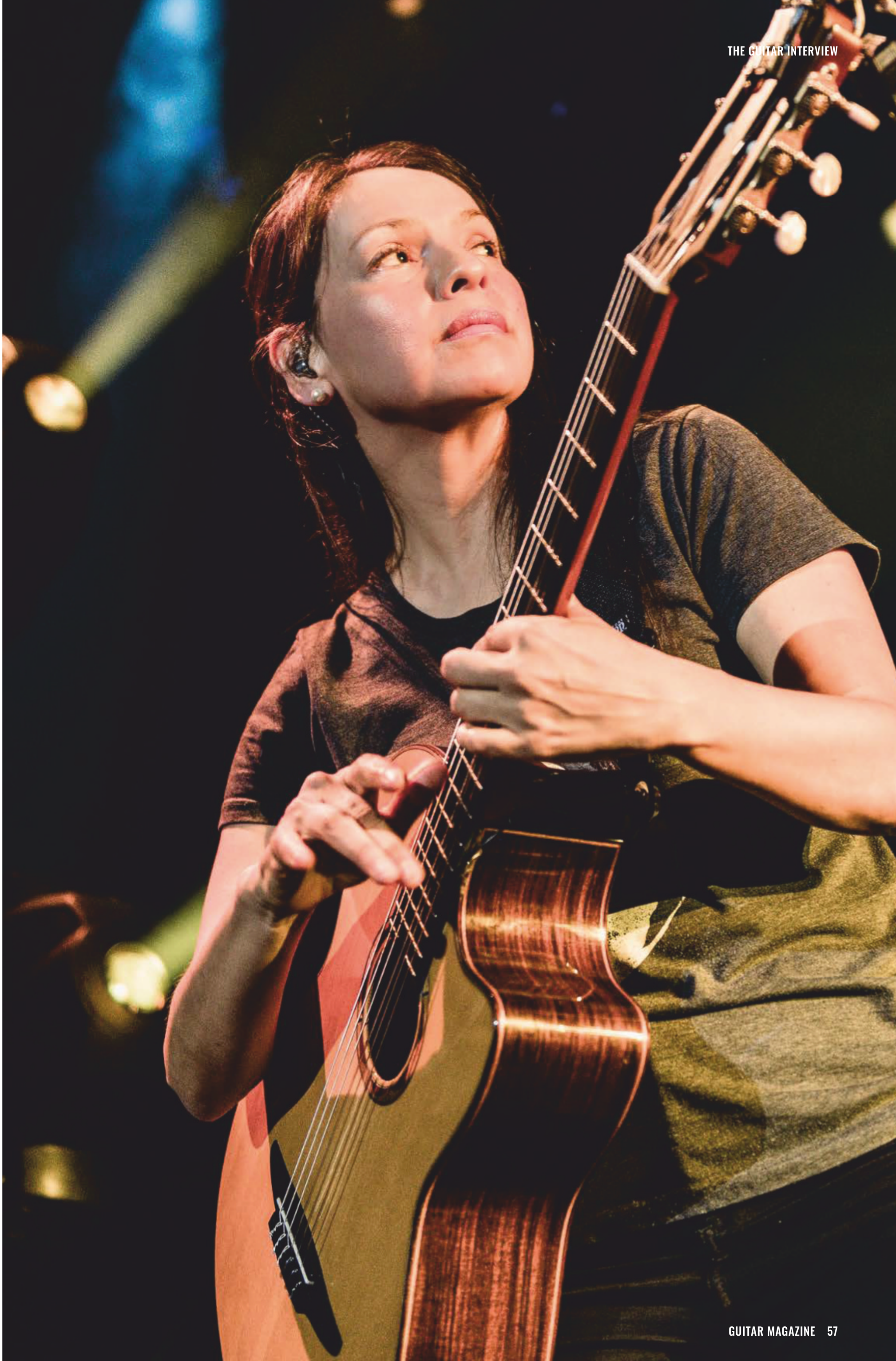
"We didn't like it, though… we were almost offended," Gab interjects, laughing. "We definitely didn't like it at the time!" Rod chuckles. "But he was pushing us. The lesson is that you have to surround yourself with good people and to trust them. Once you know them, you have to trust them.

"At the beginning, I wanted to add much more electronics and I was so confident that this was the right direction, but Gab and our manager didn't want to. And then at one point, I just let go of it… and they were right! And then everything started to open up."

With their focus and creativity stoked, we're tempted to ask Rodrigo and Gabriela if they think this will be the first step to even greater success, but as they reveal, they felt they'd made it 20 years ago, and anything else is a bonus.

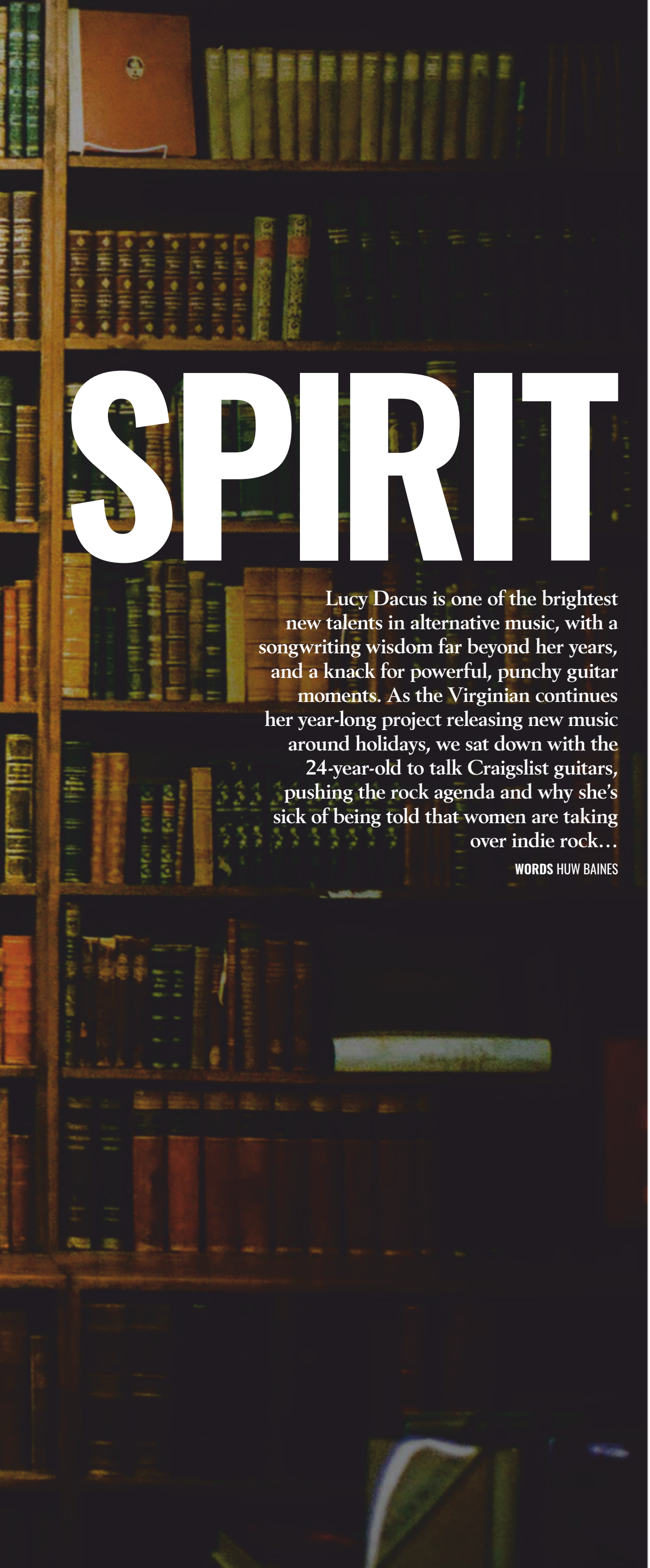
"For us, we had succeeded when we were able to play our own music and make a living out of it," Gab reflects. "So for us to go out after busking and have a cappuccino and a chocolate cake was just amazing – we'd made it! Because we were in Europe… we were like monkeys let out of a cage – this is the world! And for us, that was the ultimate success." G

***Mettavolution* by Rodrigo y Gabriela is out now on BMG**



LUCY DACUS

HOLIDAY



SPIRIT

Lucy Dacus is one of the brightest new talents in alternative music, with a songwriting wisdom far beyond her years, and a knack for powerful, punchy guitar moments. As the Virginian continues her year-long project releasing new music around holidays, we sat down with the 24-year-old to talk Craigslist guitars, pushing the rock agenda and why she's sick of being told that women are taking over indie rock…

WORDS HUW BAINES

They land like a flurry of well-directed jabs. Three descending chords – unflinchingly loud, liberally doused in fuzz – that cut through the immaculate melody of Lucy Dacus' *Addictions*. It's the sort of visceral moment that defines her second LP, 2018's *Historian*, underlining her status as one of the most dynamic, exciting voices in indie rock.

But, rather than rest on her laurels, since the record landed in the spring of 2018, Dacus hasn't stopped moving forward. Months later, between bouts of touring, she joined forces with Julien Baker and Phoebe Bridgers in the none-more-cool supergroup Boygenius. Now, with the ink barely dry on their debut EP, she's turned her attention to a song cycle that will see new music released throughout the year to mark certain holidays.

Valentine's Day and Mother's Day are already in the books – with a simmering new-wave update of *La Vie En Rose* and the sparse acoustic track *My Mother & I* respectively – but keep your eyes peeled for 4 July, Halloween, Christmas, New Year and the big one: Bruce Springsteen's birthday.

"It is so fun," Dacus says of the project. "I feel so low-stakes about it, but I also know that my insatiable desire to be sharing music is going to be met in a way that is fun and explorative and doesn't have to denote where the next record's going. Some of the songs coming out are really out of character."

Even though Dacus is still in the early stages of her career – her debut *No Burden* was released in 2016 – she does have a recognisable songwriting character, built around the give and take between her rich voice and an explosive approach to guitars. As beautiful as her music can be, she never met a rough edge she didn't like.

"The guitars should always complement the melody, never obscure it or take it over," Dacus says. "We choose tones based on the content. If the lyrics are angry or confused or frustrated, distortion comes in. If they're really pensive or confessional, we try to keep it subdued. I always value that in music, so we try to do it in ours."

Dacus grew up in the suburbs outside of Richmond, Virginia. Her first guitar – a three-quarter-sized Ibanez acoustic bought for $100 via Craigslist – was acquired because the coolest girl at summer camp also had one. "I saved up and I met some guy in a parking lot with my dad," she says. "That was my guitar for many years, it was what I learned on. I still have an affinity for the three-quarter sizes, even though I don't have any right now."

When Dacus went to high school in the city, the guitar came with her. A teacher encouraged her to

“I’M PLAYING AN AMERICAN PRO TELECASTER; I LOVE IT. IT’S JUST A STRAIGHT-UP GUITAR – A HUNK OF WOOD WITH STRINGS THAT SOUNDS GOOD AND IS REALLY MALLEABLE”

FACING PAGE Dacus performing with Tele Custom at the 2018 Green Man Festival in Wales

play during lunch period. “I was totally *that* guy,” she laughs. “Everyone was so socially awkward and really wanted an excuse to hang out. It was a much-needed unifying event for everyone to sit in the stairwell and call out covers, pass the guitar around.”

HISTORY LESSONS

While her sound in 2019 is stridently full-band, Dacus’s songs still begin with the isolation that accompanied her earliest work. *Historian* is a remarkable record that fuses indelible words with similarly powerful playing, so it’s perhaps necessary that each side is approached separately.

“I usually write alone, and on walks, and usually without trying,” she says. “I hum as I’m walking around. I’m sure people think I’m crazy. I write the lyrics and melody before I pick up the guitar – a lot of times if I figure out chords first, it’ll really cap where the melody goes. I try to let the melody wander and match it afterwards.”

When she first began playing live, Dacus picked up an Epiphone Sheraton-II and an Orange combo to plug any gaps left by her solo setup. “It had this really boomy low end, which doesn’t really make for the best clarity, but it does fill in where a bass would be,” she says. “I have a low voice, so having the guitar be low bumps my voice into sounding clearer and brighter by comparison.”

This intuitive approach – using her gear to bring each detail of her writing to the fore – has also carried over to her studio choices. Recorded with Collin Pastore in Nashville, and mixed by John Congleton, *Historian* makes use of a crisp, dry vocal treatment to spotlight some immaculate hooks while allowing the guitars, aided and abetted by Dacus’s live sideman Jacob Blizard, to get gnarly at times.

“When we were doing arrangements and figuring out tone, we’d often listen through and be like, ‘Okay, the guitar needs to back off,’” Dacus says. “We’d rein it in or change the part when it was stepping on the vocal. The mix decision is to keep the vocal on top, have that clarity and when needed, push the guitar down. But it’s always more satisfactory to push the guitar back up when there’s space for it, it feels like a good dynamic.”

Throughout, Dacus played a Gretsch White Falcon, wringing every ounce of chime from it to deliver songs built around bold, ringing chords. The LP’s palette was filled out with Teles and Strats, while on the road she’s also made the switch to the former in pursuit of headache-free versatility. “I don’t pledge allegiance to any one guitar,” she says. “I think back to that original Ibanez and recognise how formative it was. The Sheraton-II was also formative, to have my first electric. But now I’m playing an American Pro Telecaster and I love it because it’s just a straight-up guitar – just a hunk of wood with strings that sounds good and is really malleable.”

INTO DARKNESS

When it came to working with Bridgers and Baker in Boygenius, the trio were required to be similarly flexible. With each contributing skeletal arrangements to be fleshed out collaboratively, they had to find fresh spaces to occupy. At several points on their self-titled EP, notably *Bite The Hand* and *Salt In The Wound*, Baker and Bridgers are shoved into far heavier territory than they tend to visit in their solo work. The push came from Dacus.

“Julien and Phoebe were super willing to go there,” she says. “Maybe even asking for it, because they don’t go there in their own music. They were really excited, as was I, to break out of what what going to be expected of us. I might have stretched them in terms of how distorted or loud or rock-oriented the songs were, but they stretched me when it came to

© Andrew Benge/Getty Images

ABOVE The members of Boygenius – (L-R) Phoebe Bridgers, Julien Baker and Lucy Dacus – are currently in solo mode, but Dacus doesn't rule out a future reunion

the darkness of the content. "I feel like we had a lot of really helpful conversations. I always try to invoke hopefulness in my music, whereas both of them are really comfortable resting in what is messed up, or what hurts. We were all pressing each other."

So, will Boygenius remain a one off, six-songs-and-out side gig? Bridgers is already busy with another new project – Better Oblivion Community Center with Bright Eyes' Conor Oberst – while Baker and Dacus are in solo mode. "I feel like we all want to, it's just a question of logistics," Dacus says. "All of us want to put out another solo record of our own, so maybe in the coming years. We recently hung out for the first time since our tour and it was amazing. I think our friendship thriving is more important to us than getting back in the studio, but I feel like they're not mutually exclusive. I wouldn't be surprised if we did, but there's no plan."

ONE-NOTE STORY

Boygenius's success ties in with a welcome shift in indie-rock's perspective away from gangly boys in thrift-shop T-shirts. But Dacus acknowledges that many of the young women leading this change – among them Soccer Mommy's Sophie Allison and Snail Mail's Lindsey Jordan – have been grouped together uncomfortably in a lot of coverage, erasing their individuality in a manner that their male contemporaries rarely have to contemplate.

"All of us are friends, and we've talked about it," she says. "Personally, my ideas change about it day to day. Sometimes I'm fed up, sometimes I feel shrunken into a one-note type of story. I feel it's super uninteresting that we're women. But I know how important it is for girls to see women, and take up an instrument, to write and to feel like their words are worth sharing. I try to find the good in it and be grateful that people are taking notice, but in no way are any of us out here because we're women.

"The acclaim is based on their talents, their abilities, their work, not because they're women. The implied other side of the narrative is that men are out of fashion, and that's a really toxic way to think of it. There are some guys who are like, 'The only reason I'm not getting famous is because I'm not a girl'. That's super short-sighted and I would encourage anybody with that thought pattern to really press themselves to think differently." G

***Historian* by Lucy Dacus is out now through Matador**

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BILT

STILL BILL

The esteemed guitarist on being himself, letting go of theory, and why he's happy to blur genre boundaries…

WORDS SAM ROBERTS

Bill Frisell might be one of the most-recorded guitarists of his generation. Possessing one of the most recognisably bell-like guitar tones you'll ever hear, he's lauded for being among the most versatile players in jazz history. With the guitarist on the road following the recent release of his latest album *Epistrophy*, it's a welcome opportunity to chat to one of the most sought-after and respected musicians in the world.

As befits a man in such high demand, however, although he only released a new record a couple of months ago, he's already onto the next thing.

"I have a new album that I just finished called *Harmony*," he enthuses. "It's a group with Petra Haden singing. Hank Roberts plays cello, Luke Bergman plays baritone [guitar], bass and guitar. It was a thrown-together situation at a festival a few years ago in San Francisco. We hadn't played together before, y'know with cello and baritone guitar."

Despite the band's haphazard formation, Bill was quick to pounce on the abilities of his newly acquired bandmates. "At the last minute, I realised Hank and Luke could sing, so we ended up having anyone but me singing [laughs]. It was like a revelation! For me, texturally, it's a different group sound. I really get to push up against those voices with my guitar."

If it seems like there's no stopping him, well, this shouldn't be a shock – this is a musician who has racked up hundreds of credits as a sideman and session player on a vast array of genres and labels, ranging from solo-guitar works such as *Music IS* to loving homages to film composition.

Alongside these, he's also worked in dozens of ensembles, including stellar live dates alongside upright-bass player Thomas Morgan. The pair have so far recorded two albums in the form of *Small Town* and the aforementioned *Epistrophy*, which marked Bill's return to the ECM label, where Frisell was the in-house guitar player before the release of his first solo album, *In Line*, in 1983.

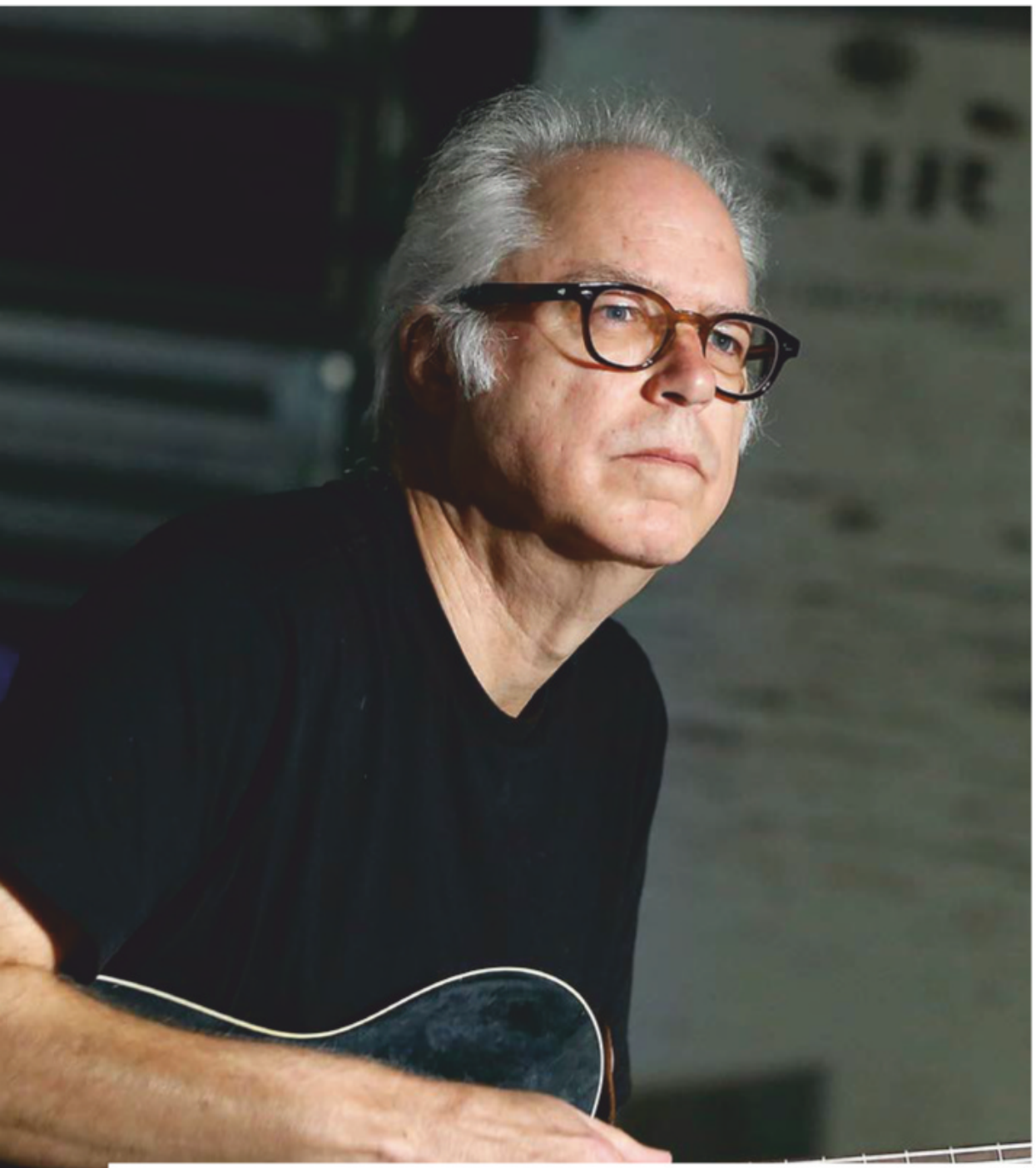
MASTER OF ALL

You don't feature on the number of records and soundtracks on which Bill has appeared without being a true student of the instrument. But despite his work encompassing everything from country and folk to jazz and Americana, he's always careful to remain true to himself and his guitar-playing style.

"That's the thing. I don't change what I do at all," he explains. "I'm not thinking about the name of what it is while I'm playing. I know we *need* to describe music, but when you try to pin it down you always come up short. When I'm in the midst of playing, the farthest thing from my mind is what the genre is. I'm using my same instincts throughout."

This becomes more apparent in the consistency of Bill's tone and approach, whether he's playing a Telecaster or a parlour guitar. When we talk, he's

ABOVE Bill playing the 26th Annual Jazz Foundation of America Loft Party in New York City in 2017



“I DROP MYSELF INTO ALL OF THESE SITUATIONS, MAYBE THE SURROUNDINGS CHANGE BUT WHAT I’M DOING DOESN’T. I’M JUST TRYING TO PLAY THE RIGHT THING”

ABOVE Frisell is renowned for being a gearhead, and has recently been favouring Telecaster-style guitars

preparing for a show with Morgan and saxophonist Greg Tardy, after playing with Grammy-winner Lucinda Williams the previous night.

“I drop myself into all of these situations, maybe the surroundings change but what I’m doing doesn’t. I’m just trying to play the right thing. That’s what’s amazing, there’s no reason why you can’t hear Robert Johnson with a Korsakov orchestration behind him!”

While Bill’s Berklee education is a thing of which most players can only dream, he still hopes that it’s possible to let go of that immense knowledge of theory and harmony when needed.

“I went to school and had all these teachers, studied books et cetera – sometimes that stuff gets in the way,” he concedes. “I want to learn as much as I can and use everything at my disposal, but for me, it’s much better if the music is coming from deeper down where you get to this place where you’re not thinking about it.”

JAZZ HANDS

As one of the finest session musicians of his generation, Bill has worked with everyone from Paul Simon and Ginger Baker to Elvis Costello and even the BBC Symphony Orchestra, but he’s reluctant to pick out a standout moment.

“That’s a hard one, as there’s been so many!” he exclaims. “I really feel like I’ve won the lottery with all the people I’ve gotten to play with. Every single person I’ve played with I learned something from.”

Instead, Bill prefers to talk about the influencers, colleagues and friends who have shaped him as a guitar player over the course of his career.

“One of the longest and most intense relationships I’ve had is with Paul Motian, the drummer,” Bill explains. “I met him in 1981 and I first heard him years before that playing with Charles Lloyd when I was in high school, and now I’m playing with Charles Lloyd! Also my teacher in Denver, Dale Bruning. I can’t imagine where I’d be without him. He first introduced me to Jim Hall’s music and then introduced me to Jim Hall.”

While Bill never got to work with John Lennon, the Beatle’s impact on him has been profound, and was something that Frisell explored on the 2011 album *All We Are Saying…*. On the album, Bill pulled in the likes of violinist Jenny Scheinman and guitarist Greg Leisz to help him reimagine classics such as *Imagine* and *Come Together*, showing that even after all this time, the Fab Four’s music can still reveal new textures and details.

“One thing about getting older is having accumulated experience everyday, you’re still learning and listening,” he reflects. “With so much music, Beethoven, Bach, Charlie Parker et cetera, coming back to it after a few years, I’ll hear a song I thought I knew and realise there’s stuff I never noticed the first time. With them [The Beatles], there’s layers and layers that keep revealing themselves. It’s deep, y’know? You think it’s just a pop song, but there’s so much more to it. It’s taken for granted because we’ve heard it so much.”

GUITAR MASTERY

Bill has a reputation as one of the biggest gearheads in jazz, but despite his genre-hopping sensibilities, he doesn’t feel the need to depend on an esoteric or revolving list of pedals to get the job done.

“It’s basically the same stuff as always,” he affirms. “I have a Tube Screamer usually and then something more extreme, like a mini EHX Muff. I’ve been using the [EHX] Freeze pedal too, which just holds whatever you play into it. Then my Line 6 DL4 too, for loops, plus a Strymon Flint.”

His guitar choices remain eccentric, though, and he’s been known to use modified Telecasters – notably a short-scale model featuring a TK Smith neck pickup, plus a custom-painted Jazzmaster with

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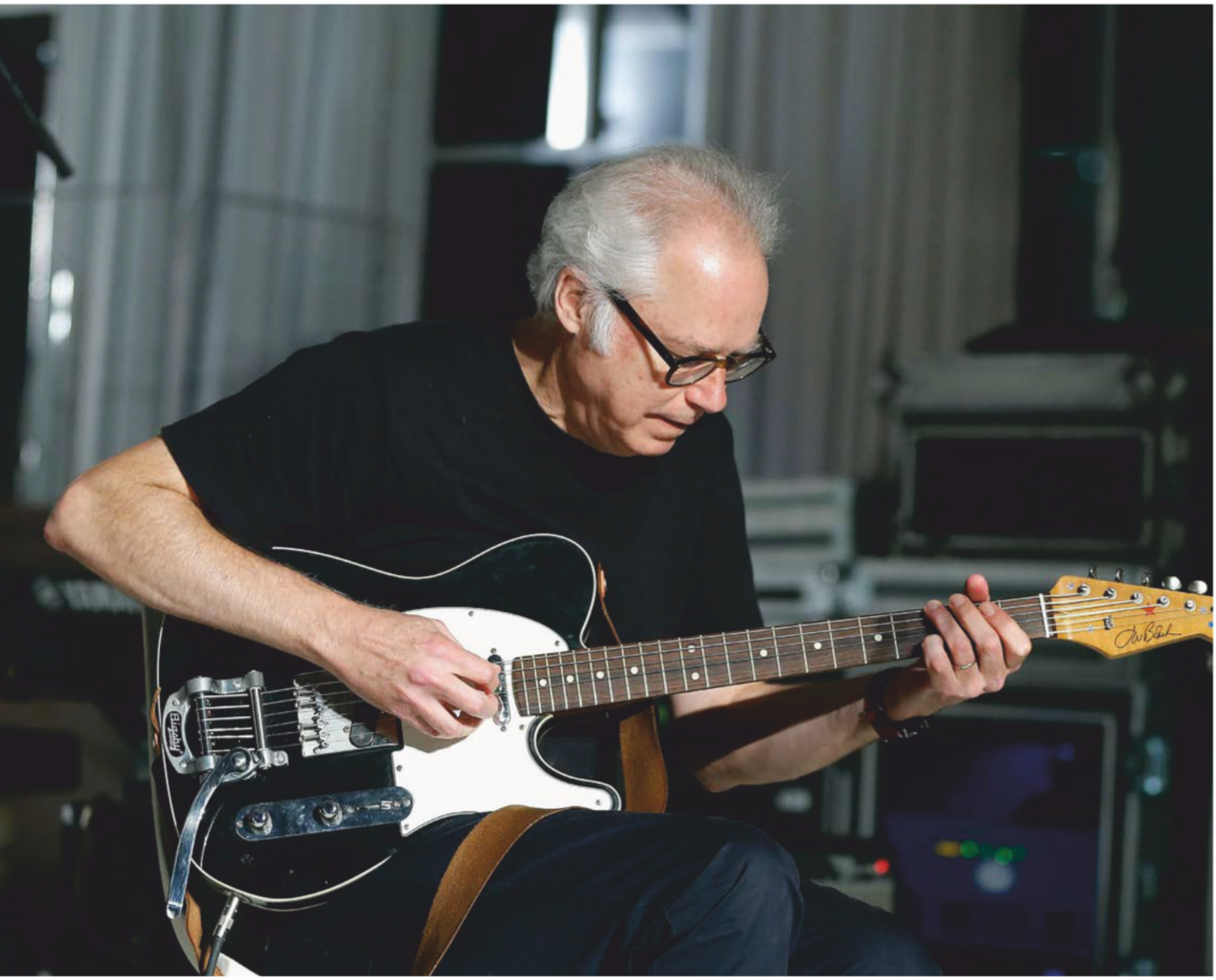

ABOVE Bill performing with a T-style guitar fitted with Callahan Pickups and custom-built by JW Black, one of the Fender Custom Shop's original Master Builders

mini-humbuckers (painted by artist Terry Turrell), alongside other Fender offsets, Collings guitars and even a Gibson ES-175.

Despite these dalliances, he still remains a Telecaster loyalist at his core, although he has been messing around with a new offering from the mind behind the Mastery Bridge.

"I got a new guitar from John Woodland who designed the Mastery Bridges," he affirms. "Right now, though, my main guitar has Jeff Callahan pickups in it, but I'm always switching things around."

FILM STAR

As befits someone with such broad tastes, Bill refuses to work within the confines of contemporary music, and instead looks for inspiration from outside sources as well.

The importance of visual art is evident in his work; his wife is an artist, as are friends Jim Woodring and the aforementioned Terry Turrell, evident through his use of experimental techniques and manipulation of the guitar neck.

If that wasn't enough, he also lends his hand to film composition, most notably soundtracking Buster Keaton's silent films *The High Sign* and *One Week*.

"I love to just sit around and try to write music, let my mind go free," he enthuses. "I haven't done much film, but it inspires me in a different way, it's almost like it puts some kind of limitation or it pushes me in ways I maybe wouldn't go."

His tireless approach to guitar is all in pursuit of the next musical epiphany. "Any time I can get out of my comfort zone, it's a good thing. It pushes you into some place you've never been. Whether it's the same song, or with the same people, I think that's the most exciting thing for a musician and the audience, too. If everyone is experiencing that, it's an amazing thing," he says.

Whether playing avant-garde jazz, folk music or working with film scores, Bill's timbral elegance and lucidity always finds room to shine through and elevate the recording. When it comes to advising the next generation of guitarists, however, his instruction couldn't be more straightforward.

"With the guitar, if you think about Robert Johnson and Jimi Hendrix and Wes Montgomery, they all played the same instrument tuned the same way! Just listen to them and others will follow." G

***Epistrophy* by Bill Frisell is out now on ECM Records**

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WINNING FORMULA

After suffering two strokes in 2005, Edwyn Collins' rehabilitation has been long and arduous. But now the Scottish songwriter is back with a new album, a replica of his notorious fuzz pedal and a purpose-built studio filled with vintage guitars…

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY MARK ALEXANDER

ABOVE Edwyn Collins' purpose-built timber-and-zinc-clad recording studio, Clashnarrow, in Helmsdale, Scotland

OPPOSITE, TOP Edwyn's ninth solo album, *Badbea*, is named after an abandoned village near to his home

OPPOSITE, BELOW Edwyn's Neve console was put together from spares by studio technician Blake Devitt

There is musical brilliance in writing a riff that connects with people so deeply that it never really leaves them. Recalled at a drop of hat, these irresistible hooks are the antitheses of intricacy, but have ceaseless, persuasive staying power.

The infectious Top 10 hit *A Girl Like You*, penned by Edwyn Collins, is a perfect example of the power of an insistent guitar line. Despite being written in 1994, the fuzzed-up single still has bite, swagger and lasting appeal, as does the man who wrote it.

Edwyn is building up to the release of his ninth solo album and fourth since suffering two debilitating strokes in 2005. He says this new release marks a significant milestone in his long and determined recovery. "The lyrics were quite specific and simple back then," he says, discussing *Losing Sleep*, the first solo album released after his illness. "I'm not sure what's going on. Now the lyrics are a progression."

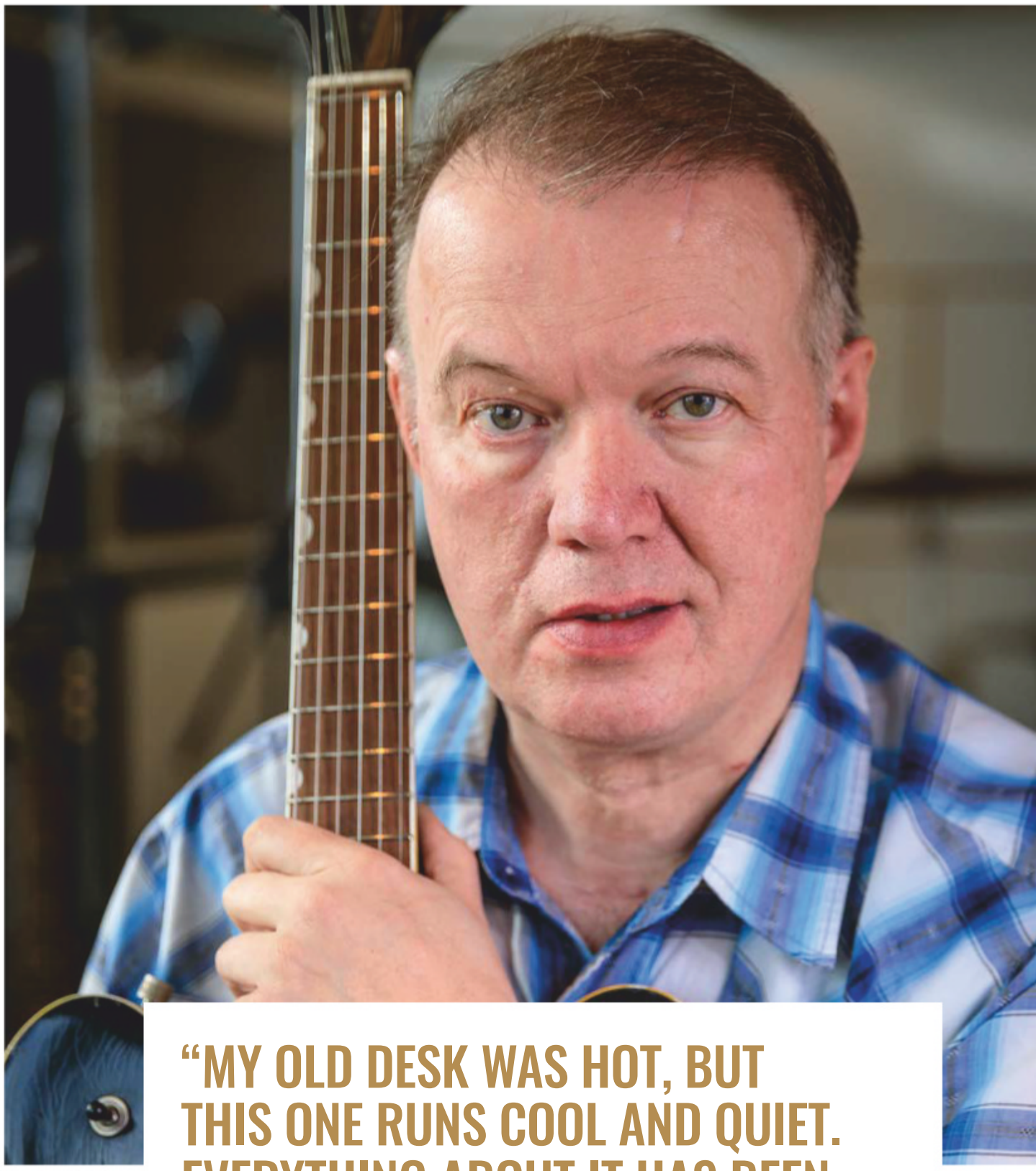
The new record, *Badbea*, is named after an abandoned clifftop village five miles north of his home and purpose-built studio, Clashnarrow, in Helmsdale on the north-east coast of Scotland. The lead track, *Outside*, delivers an anthemic riff driven by a pounding rhythm section. Brooding, brash and raucous, it's a tricky tune to shift from your inner ear.

Sitting in the comfort of the accommodation wing of his studio, he is charming and exuberant. "It feels brilliant," he says. "I've come a long way, especially in the lyrics department. I'm excited about this new album – touch wood, fingers crossed and all that."

HOME AGAIN

Edwyn and his wife Grace moved the songwriter's London studio to Scotland in 2015, and it's easy to see why. The new location is perched high above the A9 with 180-degree views of the North Sea and the dramatic weather that sweeps across this awesome coastal landscape. You get the distinct feeling that the inspiration drawn from solitude is never far away.

Although *Badbea* is Edwyn's first album at Clashnarrow, he's sat behind the desk to record other artists who have made the trip up north to check out the studio's special views and exceptional features. Teenage Fanclub, Hooton Tennis Club, Tracyanne & Danny, Meggie Brown (produced by Alex Kapranos), Shopping and David Gray have all sampled the venue's fantastic live room and Edwyn's custom-built analogue Rupert Neve recording console, which was assembled from his library of spares by studio-tech supremo Blake Devitt.

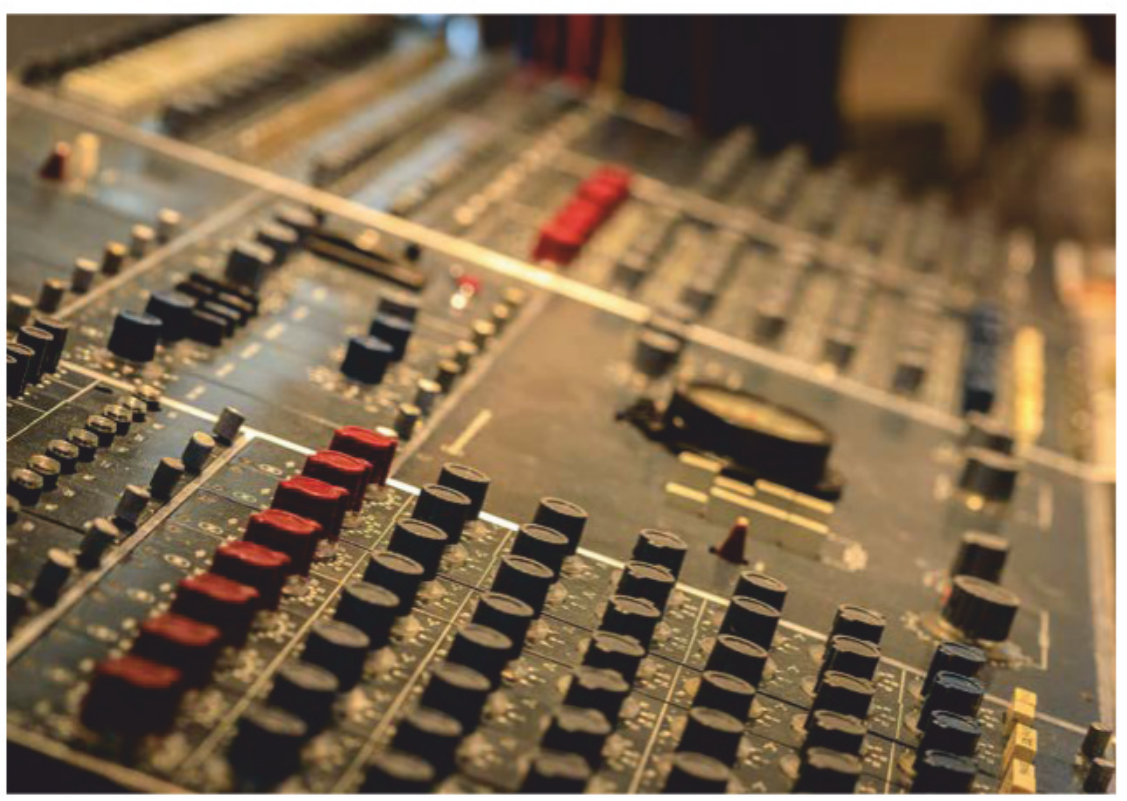


"MY OLD DESK WAS HOT, BUT THIS ONE RUNS COOL AND QUIET. EVERYTHING ABOUT IT HAS BEEN PERFECT. TO ME, DIGITAL IS FINE, BUT ANALOGUE IS MAGIC"

"He said he was going to make me the best Neve desk ever – and he did," says Edwyn. "My old desk was hot, but this one runs cool and quiet. Everything about it has been perfect. To me, digital is fine, but analogue is magic."

Evidence of his passion for vintage is everywhere. A wall of compressors, reverbs and other outboard units displaying names such as Raytheon and Teletronix sit behind his studio chair. The live room is populated by a line-up of aged microphones which stand guard over some classic Fender combos. The array of seasoned dials appears to come from the set of a 1960s sci-fi movie, but these are more than just props. Each has its place in Edwyn's setup and his pursuit of an authentic sound.

Order and logic sit neatly beside flair and attitude in this bespoke studio. But there is also an important place reserved for experimentation. "*A Girl Like You* was an experiment, especially in the EQ department," he says. "I tried to do my best with *A Girl Like You*. EQ is everything."



GORGEOUS GUITARS

Edwyn's penchant for the past is particularly evident in his guitar collection, which ranges from pre-war

"EVERYBODY LOVES THE '65 TELE, RODDY FRAME IN PARTICULAR. BUT THE BACK PICKUP ISN'T A TELE PICKUP; IT'S FROM A STRAT, SO IT GIVES IT A UNIQUE SOUND"

ABOVE, LEFT Collins bought his stripped 1964 Stratocaster in London in 1989 for just £800

ABOVE, TOP RIGHT This 1965 Telecaster has a Stratocaster pickup in the bridge position, which had already been fitted when Edwyn acquired it

ABOVE, BOTTOM RIGHT This Bigsby-equipped mid-60s ES-330 is another gorgeous instrument in residence at Edwyn's studio

Gibson acoustics to road-worn Fenders and cherished Gretsches. In the beginning, however, he started with a banjo ukulele, moved on to £20 Höfner acoustic before graduating to a Burns Nu-Sonic and 15-watt Watkins Dominator to round off his teenage years.

Without fail, each instrument was bought pre-loved. "I have always liked second-hand stuff – guitars, amplifiers and pedals. I liked going to flea markets and junk shops," he says. "When I was in my first group, Orange Juice, I got a Gretsch Blackhawk. I saw the advert in the *Glasgow Evening Times* and got it for £115 in 1979. It has great pickups."

While Edwyn has always had an eye for a bargain, his ears make most of the decisions about whether a guitar stays or goes. His white 1965 Telecaster, for example, has kept its place in his guitar roster because of its unique sound, but only just. "Everybody loves that guitar; Roddy Frame [Aztec Camera] in particular," he says. "But the back pickup isn't a Tele pickup; it's from a Strat, so it gives it a unique sound. It was like that when I got it."

Edwyn even tried to gift it to a friend in return for a much-needed favour: "During the late 1980s, Phil Thornalley, who did a lot of work with Orange Juice, helped us out with some studio time. We were broke. I knew Phil loved my Telecaster so I wanted to give it to him to say thanks, but he wouldn't take it. He is my friend, a lovely guy and generous to a fault. He really helped us out."

Edwyn's bargain-hunting prowess was on top form when he bought his 1964 Fender Stratocaster in Denmark Street in 1989 for £800. Stripped of its original finish, this authentic L-Series Strat has the battle scars to prove its worth. "It's a lovely guitar, and pre-CBS," he says. "You could just about make out its sunburst when I got it."

For many people, the shattering strokes that derailed Edwyn's career in 2005 would have ended any aspiration to play the guitar. But he firmly insists that he still plays and often uses a hammer-on technique to sound chords. "I can still play the guitar crudely," he says stoically. "I can still sing and I play along with the band in my head." Despite frailty down the right-hand side of his body, Edwyn still

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1959 Fender Stratocaster maple neck
1961 Fender Stratocaster Blonde
1962 Fender Stratocaster Fiesta Red
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1952 Fender Telecaster ex-Lenny Kravitz
1953 Fender Telecaster
1956 Fender Telecaster
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1968 Fender Telecaster Thinline
1969 Fender Telecaster Sonic Blue

1959 Fender Jazzmaster Blonde
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1963 Gibson Les Paul SG STD
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1980 Musicman Bass MINT!

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1972 Dick Knight Custom Twin Neck ex Jon Camp Renaissance
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"THE GIBSON L-00 ACOUSTIC HAS EVERYTHING. IT PLAYS BEAUTIFULLY. I STILL PLAY IT FROM TIME TO TIME WORKING OUT CHORDS, CHORUSES AND VERSES. IT'S MAGICAL"

ABOVE This 1958 Gretsch Anniversary is a collector's dream, complete with original case candy

RIGHT This Gretsch Blackhawk has been with Edwyn since 1979

OPPOSITE, TOP A trio of beautiful vintage Gibson acoustics poised for action in Clashnarrow's live room

loves his instruments and acquired his last "posh" guitar in 2007, two years after his illness.

The 1958 Gretsch Anniversary arrived with an array of fantastically preserved case-candy goodies. "We bidded for it on eBay and it came from the US," he explains. "The guy was selling it on behalf of a retired music teacher and jazz player. He was the only owner and he kept absolutely everything." As you would imagine, the various price tags and receipts only add to the mojo surrounding a 61-year-old guitar.

A trio of Gibsons in the live room have a similar aura, with each bearing the tell-tale signs of a much-loved instrument. Edwyn picks out a beautiful L-00. Known for its bright tone and quick response, the guitar is suited for fingerstyle country-blues, although he maintains it can handle anything.

"It has a V-shaped neck," he explains, "but it's light. It has everything. It plays beautifully. I still play it

ALL YOU NEED IS FUZZ

Edwyn Collins will forever be associated with the grime of fuzz thanks to his Top 10 hit, *A Girl Like You*. A faithful reproduction of the pedal that created that unmistakable tone was released in 2016…

Based on Edwyn's own B&M Fuzz Unit, the new Sola Sound BUM Fuzz pedal is loaded with gain-selected BC184 silicon transistors that offer a low signal-to-noise ratio. The fuzz tone is described as "smooth with a broad and very even EQ balance". Edwyn got the original B&M pedal from Denmark Street in 1980. It eventually lost its ampersand, which was replaced with a gaffer-tape U. "I got it for £20, because no one wanted it," Edwyn recalls. "I don't remember a show when I didn't have it at my feet.

"Anthony Macari [of Macari's Musical Instruments in London] asked if I minded opening up the pedal. I didn't, so they copied the wiring exactly. The new pedal has a boosted signal giving it a bit more power than my old one." Of the 30 units Edwyn and his wife Grace received to sell online, only two remain. Get one while you can!

"I THINK ABOUT CHORDS. I PLUG IT IN AND HAMMER ON CHORDS TO COME UP WITH TUNES, BUT I HAVE TO CHANNEL MY IDEAS THROUGH MY GUITAR-PLAYING FRIENDS"

ABOVE Clashnarrow has hosted a wide range of acts, including Teenage Fanclub and David Gray

from time to time working out chords, choruses and verses. It's magical."

HOPE AND DESPAIR

Edwyn Collins has essentially had two careers. The first spanned the incredible success of his band Orange Juice and a solo career filled with TV appearances, sharp suits and success. The second has seen the re-emergence and growing confidence of a prodigious songwriter who was forced to reconstruct his life following the shock and turmoil of a devastating illness.

"I used to write songs on the guitar all the time. Constantly. I was always picking up an unplugged electric while watching the TV," he says. "Sometimes, I would go to the bedroom to focus with a dictation machine, but not digital; an analogue one. I still pick up the guitar now and think about chords. I plug it in and hammer on chords to come up with tunes, but I have to channel my ideas through my guitar-playing friends now."

Badbea was co-produced with Sean Read (Dexys Midnight Runners and The Rockingbirds) and recorded with the help of long-term musical collaborators Carwyn Ellis (Colorama) and James Walbourne (The Pretenders and The Rails). Edwyn has a "mad appetite to get out there" to promote the album. His enthusiasm is infectious and his laugh joyous.

Gigs have been lined up later in the year with a familiar group of musicians and a tasty setlist. Edwyn is looking forward to playing his music, although he always has.

"Since my stroke, I've toured in Japan, Australia, America and Europe. The first show I did in London after my illness was part of the BBC *Electric Proms*," he says, smiling.

"After the show, everyone was so drunk, apart from me. The whole place was awash with emotion, champagne and relief, I guess. It was very tense. Roddy Frame played with me. It was great."

Edwyn Collins is in a good place, content with his lot. After all he has gone through, no one would deny him that.

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THE MONEY SHOT
KALAMAZOO KG-14

Recently under the hammer courtesy of our friends at Gardiner Houlgate Guitar Auctions in Corsham, UK, this late-1930s Kalamazoo acoustic fetched a healthy £1,922 including fees at the June 2019 sale. Manufactured at the iconic 225 Parsons St address in Kalamazoo, Michigan – the birthplace of many of the greatest acoustic and electric instruments in history – budget guitars such as the KG-14 were Gibson's answer to Depression-era economics that saw wooden toys being manufactured on the factory production line simply to keep the workers in employment. Of all the Kalamazoo-branded instruments, the KG-14 probably has the most allure thanks to its association with Robert Johnson. And although this particular guitar has undergone some major surgery in its lifetime – not least being reworked internally with X bracing – it's still brimming with Dust Bowl tones and vintage mojo. Hear it in action over at youtube.com/theguitarmagazine and visit guitar-auctions.co.uk to find out more.

VOLUME
TONE
TONE
VOLUME

VINTAGE BENCH TEST

OUT OF THE BLUE

We have The Beatles to thank for the popularity of the sunburst Casino, but this custom-colour model from the psychedelic era is a collectible delight

WORDS HUW PRICE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

ABOVE The bridge pickup's pole screws have been jacked up to achieve better balance with the neck pickup

OPPOSITE TOP By 1967, Gibson had moved onto chrome-plated hardware and nylon saddles, as seen on this back-to-front bridge

OPPOSITE Epiphone's truss-rod cover has an unusual shape – the upper layer was engraved to create the logo

The Epiphone Casino, more formally known as the E230TD, is not an especially rare guitar. As a result, plenty of vintage examples are priced comparably to modern Custom Shop and boutique equivalents.

However, unlike the standard sunburst and cherry paint-jobs, very few of the other 1,813 Casinos to leave Kalamazoo in 1967 were finished in this rare Pelham Blue metallic hue.

Traces of the white undercoat and original blue can be seen in the chips and heavily rubbed areas on the lower bout. Although Gibson described Pelham Blue as a 'poly' finish, it was actually an acrylic lacquer and they always sprayed clear nitrocellulose topcoats.

Inevitably, the nitro has checked all over and yellowed, turning this Casino's blue finish green to the extent that it's closer to Fender's Ocean Turquoise. Looking under the pickguard for traces of the original colour, we are surprised to discover that it's even greener under there.

The only non-original parts here are the black reflector knobs – the factory fittings for a 1967 Casino would have been 'witch hat' knobs, but the previous owner swapped them because he preferred the earlier look. We tend to agree, but it turns out the original knobs are safely stashed inside the guitar's case, which is also original.

When new, the vibrant blue, bright chrome-plated hardware, white binding and pickguard must have been a striking combination. It still oozes charisma, although the binding has yellowed and the pickguard has veered towards the greenish parchment tone you often see on late-60s Fender scratchplates.

Coming off the Kalamazoo production line with fret-edge binding and period Gibson hardware and electronics, the Casino was clearly not a budget alternative for the essentially identical ES-330. Paul McCartney rates his '62 Casino as his all-time favourite electric and John and George must have agreed, because they each bought Casinos, too. The British beat boom bristled with players who favoured Casinos at one point or another – Keith Richards, Brian Jones and Dave Davies were all fans of the Epiphone hollowbody.

HANDS ON

Since Gibson and Epiphone had already been making some of the world's finest archtop instruments for decades, our expectations for the Casino's unplugged tone are high. It doesn't disappoint. This is a naturally

loud and full-bodied guitar, with impressive sustain compared to some other ES-330s and Casinos of a similar vintage that we've encountered.

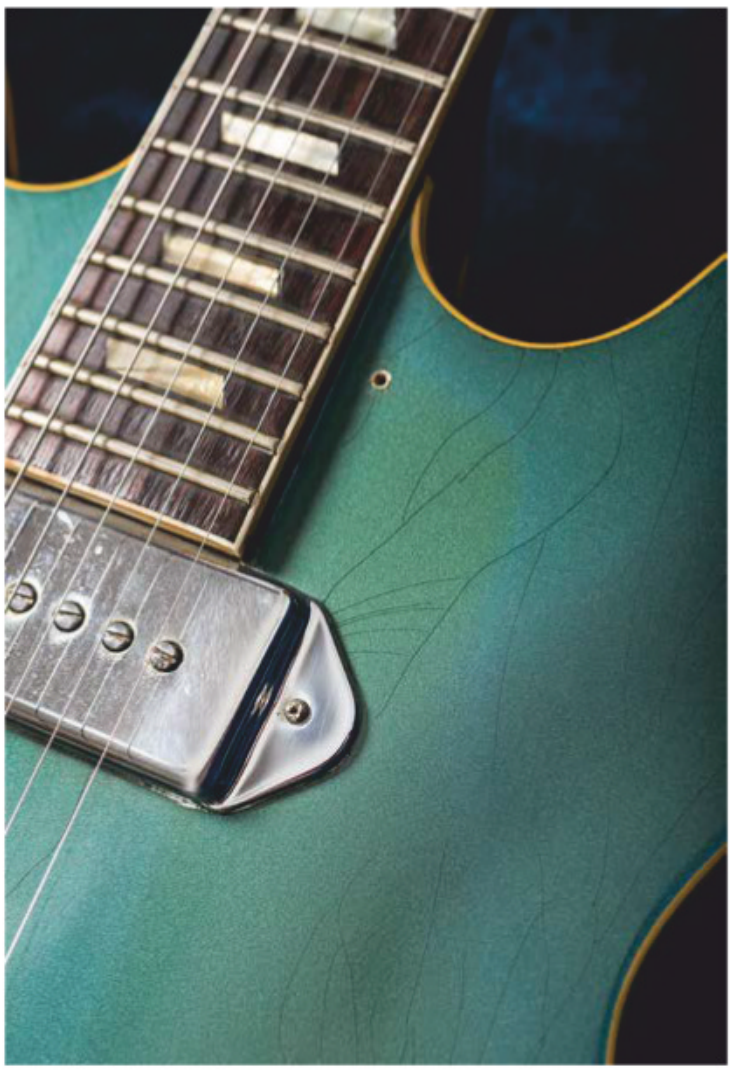
Having carried out several parts-swapping experiments on this type of instrument, we've found that nylon saddles play a significant role in producing this warm and fat tone.

Metal saddles on an ABR-1 generally deliver more treble, less midrange and perhaps not quite as much sustain. Both configurations have their fans and earlier ES-330s and Casinos with metal bridge saddles are highly sought-after for their tonal qualities, too.

By 1967, Gibson and Epiphone necks felt very different to their earlier counterparts. The neck on the instrument we have here has depth, but it's also fairly narrow. Compared to our 1962 ES-330, the difference in fretboard width amounts to about 3mm. It may not sound like a lot, but in neck-carve terms, it's significant.

The depth of the neck is considerable as it fattens out towards the body, even approaching 1950s Gibson standards – and even though it's shallower up at the nut, the narrow nut width makes it feel deeper than it is. Some players may even find the string spacing a little cramped in the lower registers.

THERE'S TREMENDOUS CLARITY WITHOUT EXCESSIVE TREBLE AND WITH AN OVERDRIVEN AMP, SINGLE NOTES HAVE A DISTINCTLY FLUTY QUALITY IN HIGHER REGISTERS



IN USE

Time to plug in, and we quickly discover that the pickups are out of phase. A magnetic-compass test shows that both pickups have identical magnetic polarity, which may indicate that the wiring has been modified, but there's enough anecdotal evidence to suggest quite a few Gibsons left the factory with out-of-phase wiring.

This could have been by special request because someone was looking for those T-Bone Walker tones, or a simple mistake in hooking up the coils that reversed the wiring of one pickup. Either way, it's a feature that many players will appreciate and it's one that can be reversed by rotating the magnets in one of the pickups.

The bridge and neck pickups on most vintage ES-330s and Casinos are rather imbalanced in terms of output and this example is no exception. That said,

ABOVE For some, having the Epiphone name on the headstock makes this guitar more desirable than Gibson's ES-330 equivalent

LEFT Unexpectedly, the lacquer under the pickguard has a greener look and the exposed areas are a couple of shades closer to the original Pelham Blue

ABOVE The Epiphone label can be found inside the bass-side f-hole and the model and serial numbers are still clearly legible

some are more closely matched than others and this is better than most.

We hear two very distinct tones from these chrome-covered P-90s. The neck sounds more reminiscent of the unplugged tone and it's smooth, fat and very woody. There's tremendous clarity without excessive treble and with an overdriven amplifier, single notes have a distinctly fluty quality in higher registers.

The bridge has that clangier and more percussive edge that makes Casinos such superb rhythm guitars. Whether you're jangling away in clean mode, or thrashing it out with overdrive, the Casino remains punchy and clear. There's also an upper-midrange resonance that lends the bridge pickup a slightly wiry quack that we particularly like.

Because our '62 ES-330's pickup covers are plastic and the Casino's are metal, we are presented with an opportunity to evaluate how P-90s from a similar era compare. There's not a world of difference and it's most apparent on the neck pickups, but the plastic-covered pickups have a more open and airy treble response.

In contrast, the metal-covered pickups are smoother, warmer and mellower. The ES-330 has more wiriness and bite, and when soloing, the underlying tone is more 'eee' than 'ooo'. Both guitars can be hard work if you're trying to coax smooth and sustaining high-gain lead tones out of vintage-style valve amps, but jump on any decent overdrive or fuzz pedal and it becomes a non-issue – just ask Gary Clark Jr… G

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £12,500
DESCRIPTION Hollowbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
BUILD Maple-ply body with mahogany neck, bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, 20 frets
HARDWARE Kluson tuners, trapeze tailpiece and Tune-o-matic bridge
ELECTRONICS 2x P-90 pickups, 2x volume, 2x tone, 3-way switch
SCALE LENGTH 624mm/24.6"
NECK WIDTH 39.8mm at nut, 50.3mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.5mm at first fret, 24.5mm at 9th fret
STRING SPACING 34.2mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
WEIGHT 2.72kg/6lb
FINISH Pelham Blue
CONTACT ATB Guitars
atbguitars.com

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Eastman T64/v-GB **£1,769**, Collings I-30 LC **£5,099**, Epiphone Elitist '1965' Casino **£1,799**

AYNSLEY LISTER
SIGNATURE

35W ALL-VALVE HANDWIRED AMPLIFIER
SPRING REVERB
SERIES FX LOOP
EMINENCE 'THE GOVERNOR' SPEAKERS
AVAILABLE IN HEAD, 1X12", AND 2X12" COMBOS

Andertons
MUSIC CO.

RIFT AMPLIFICATION
HANDWIRED IN ENGLAND

SHOP TALK

NIK AZAM

CERIATONE AMPLIFICATION

WORDS DAVE HUNTER

Britain and the US might traditionally be the homes of overdriven thermionics, but one maker in Malaysia has been satisfying countless guitarists' quests for high-quality, hand-wired tone for a solid decade and a half. We talk to Ceriatone founder and proprietor Nik Azam to find out how it's done and what this game-changing amp maker has in store for the future…

We're not talking about an offshore manufacturing facility catering to the entry-level models of major makers, or some mass-production clearing house cranking out consumer-grade goods for big-box stores. We're talking Ceriatone Amplification, and since 2006, Ceriatone has been producing entirely hand-built amps, backed by cutting-edge design prowess, to compete with just about any boutique maker, while often ruffling quite a few feathers in the process.

STEEL CITY

A guitarist and tube-amp enthusiast from a young age, Nik Azam gained his formal training in electrical and computer engineering at the highly respected Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the late 1990s.

"Of course, there's not much about tubes taught these days," he reflects, "but the basic concepts are the same. Training-wise, though, specifically for amps, you just learn things yourself. The internet is a wealth of knowledge, but actually doing it – initially through repairs to vintage amps – is very important."

After earning his degree, he returned home to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to work for the company that sponsored his education, but quit after 10 months to form an IT business with some friends, doing custom software and web work and generally making a pretty good success of it. All the while, though, the amp bug was nibbling at him, and Nik found himself spending more and more time dabbling in repairs, hanging out on internet amp forums and generally getting drawn toward that world.

Identifying a need for several components that amp hobbyists were fervently seeking, he began making and acquiring parts to sell himself: first turret boards and other small components, then larger items such as chassis and transformers and, before long, complete amps, short of the cabinets to put them in. Around

2003, Nik hired his first employee for the business and began weaning himself off the IT work. In 2006, he formally registered Ceriatone as a company in order to focus on the business full-time, and his wife, Azlin, quit her job to join him in the venture.

KIT AND KABOODLE

Since Ceriatone was quickly amassing bins full of just about every part you might need to build your own renditions of a great number of classic amps, it was an entirely logical move to begin offering them bundled together in ready-made packages. Within its first few years of operation, Ceriatone quickly became known as one of the world's premier suppliers of full amplifier kits, although Nik always offered the option of building the thing for you if you didn't want to tackle that yourself.

Over the years, the balance has shifted dramatically and the company now sells far more complete amps than they do kits. Ceriatone has 18 employees, including Nik and Azlin, building between 80 and 120 amps a month and offering more than 50 models, spanning vintage classics to popular modern formats and Ceriatone originals.

Tipping the balance from kits to full builds, however, found some critics levelling the accusation of 'cloners' or 'copiers' at Ceriatone. It would seem thousands of guitarists were happy to 'clone' or 'copy' an amp for themselves, but manufacture an amp named Hey What or PrinzeTone or Muchle$$ DZ 30 for the open market and a few feathers get ruffled.

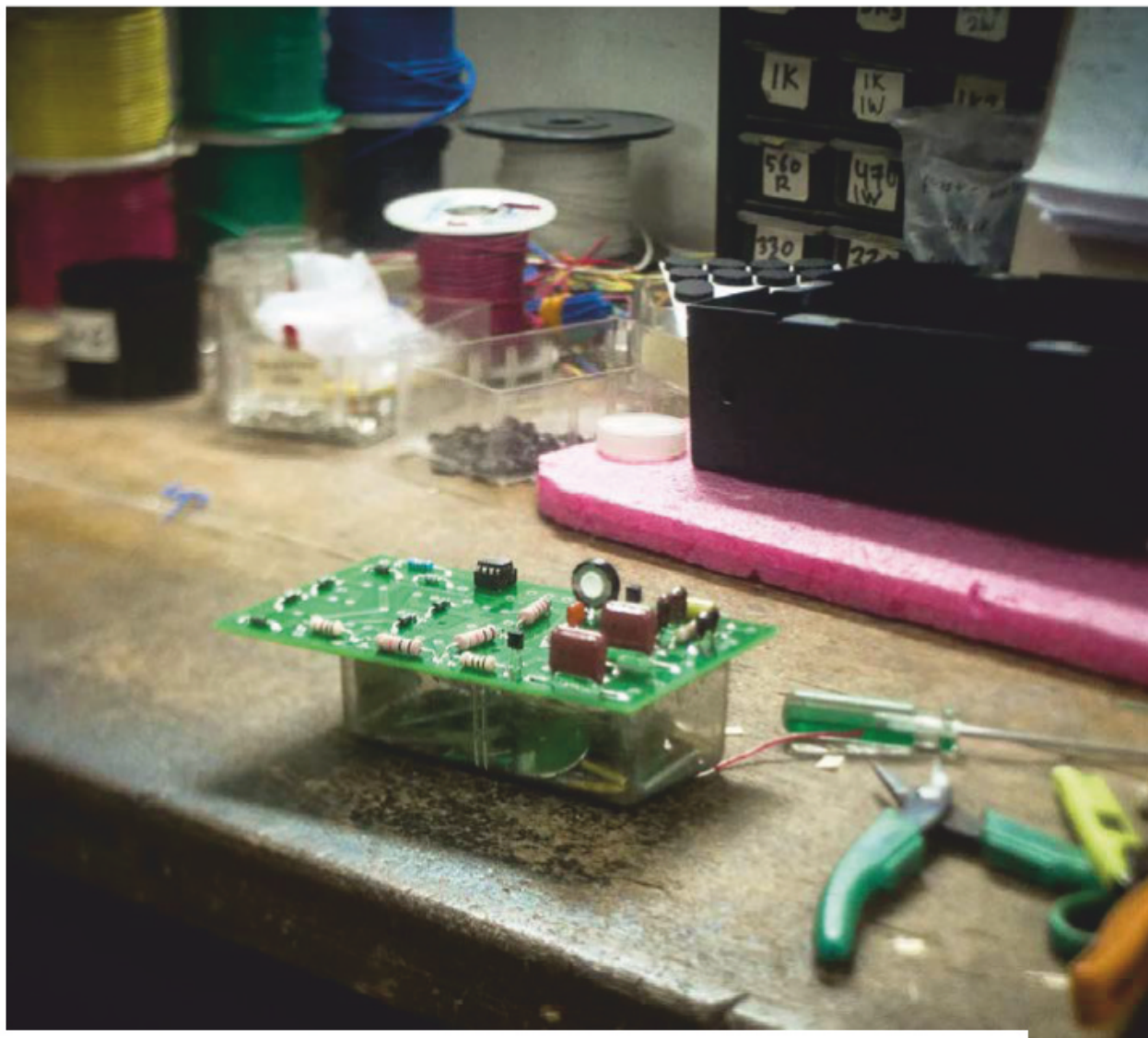
Take a step back, though and two significant factors come into focus: one, Ceriatone really isn't doing anything different from the vast majority of boutique amp makers over the past three decades and two, Nik is just more upfront than most about the inspirations for each of Ceriatone's amp models.

"There were a lot of boutique-amp companies that started at around the same time as us," he says, "and lots of them were doing the exact same thing as we do. Some of them are even still around. They might call their amps other names, but the circuit remains about the same, or with some minor tweaks, which we also have in all of our amps. But it's not something I fight against. If this were the phone market, people who want a fancy smartphone would know where to go. If they need a rotary dial phone, they know they can come to me. The difference is, we also offer fancy smartphones as well."

MOD SQUAD

For readers who haven't experienced a Ceriatone amp first hand, or aren't at least familiar with some of the specs and features, it's worth pointing out that Nik's words about including "minor tweaks" in these amps constitutes understatement in the extreme.

A model such as the lunchbox-sized 2202 might be based broadly on the late-70s and early 80s circuit within Marshall's 2204 Master Model amps, but in addition to doing it at half the power with 6V6s in place of EL34s, Ceriatone's 2202 includes an added second gain-stage adjustment control, a post-phase-inverter master volume, a Deep (bass resonance) control, Bright, Boost and Fat switches, a buffered FX loop and external bias check and adjustment points, among other refinements in the internal construction.



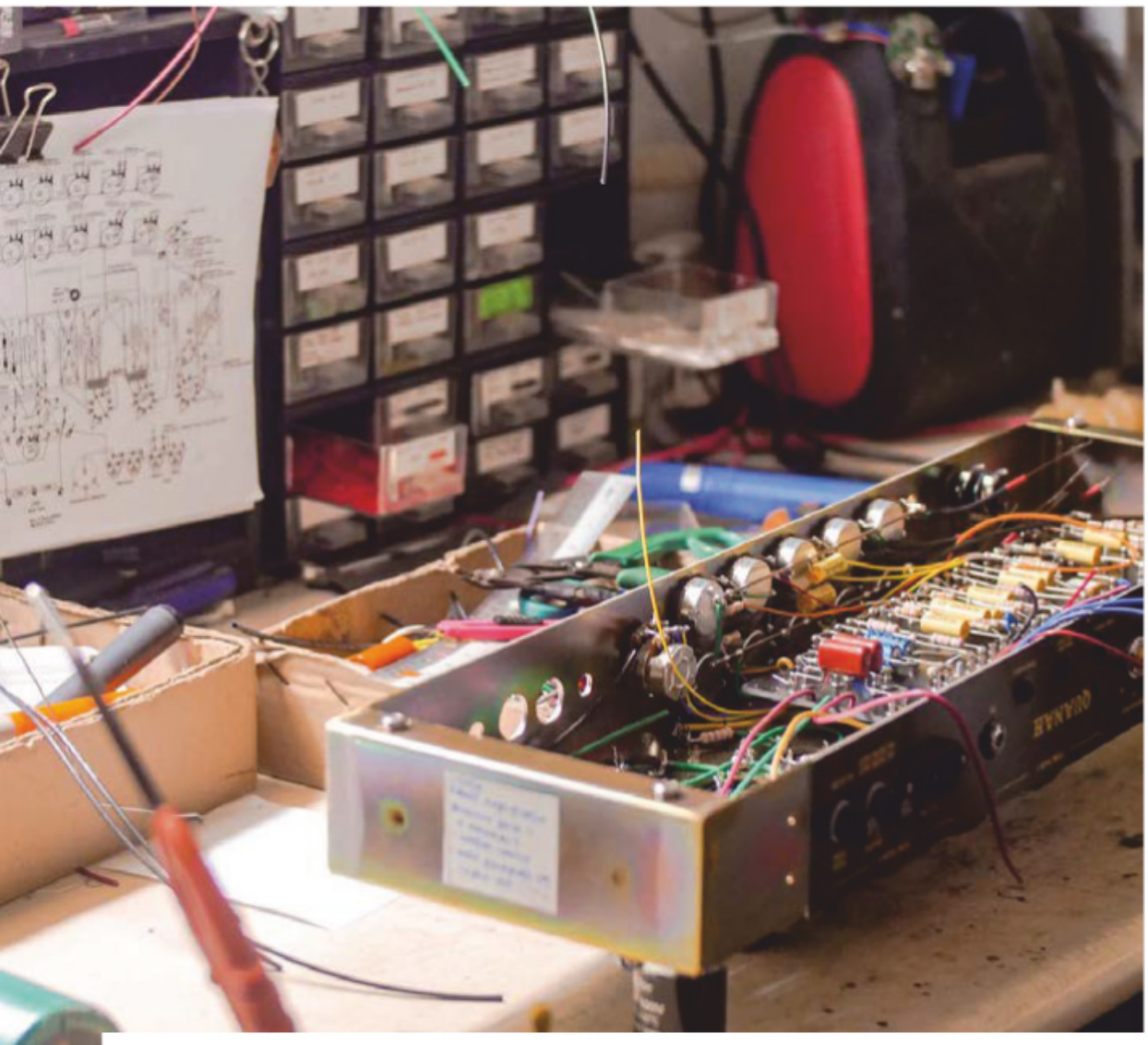
"FOR AMPLIFIERS, YOU JUST LEARN THINGS YOURSELF. THE INTERNET IS A WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE, BUT ACTUALLY DOING IT IS VERY IMPORTANT"

OPPOSITE Nik Azam in Ceriatone Amplification's workshop in Kuala Lumpur, where all Ceriatone amps and pedals are built by hand

In other words, more than enough original thinking for any other maker to have slapped a 'we designed this!' tag on the thing. The same sort of exclusivity applies to bigger, more powerful, classically British-voiced, high-gain monsters such as Ceriatone's Chupacabra and Yeti, which have also been two of its more popular offerings in recent years.

"Some of these are common things that people have asked for as mods," says Nik, "and honestly, I was tired of drilling chassis and faceplates – our chassis come laser-CNC'd from our vendor now – to put in the requested mods, so we added these features as stock. Although we still do lots of customisation per individual request, actually.

"Other things, like the bias check," he adds, "are just things that I think are not only convenient for the users, but also for me as a manufacturer. It allows for users to be able to check their bias, as a preventative



“A LOT OF THINGS DO MATTER. SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS SOLDERING, THE TECHNIQUE MATTERS A LOT. IT’S ACTUALLY ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS”

THIS SPREAD Ceriatone amplifier builds in progress on the workbench

measure, without having to open up the amp and face the high voltages within.

“Of course, that does not replace the need for a tech and proper periodic maintenance or repair, but in this day and age, if just biasing the amp costs the user £75, then the argument against tube amps versus digital modelling amps becomes stronger. Tube amps will always have higher maintenance costs due to the tubes being wearables, but at least we try to minimise that.”

SOLDER OF FORTUNE

Less obvious to the player than the bevy of bonus features on the outside of many Ceriatone amps is the care with which Nik and his team approach everything on the inside. I’ve played and reviewed several different models in the course of my own work, and have no qualms attesting to the quality applied to circuit wiring, assembly and so on, to the extent that it’s no stretch to say that the insides of these things are easily on a par with the vast majority of hand-built amps from Europe and North America.

In developing this level of craftsmanship and quality control, Nik has formed some very firm opinions on what really matters inside the box, to the extent that he demurs when prodded to name a few things that might be less consequential to the overall results than many players might think.

“A lot of things *do* matter,” he tells us. “Something as simple as soldering, the technique matters a lot and it’s actually one of the most important things. And there are, of course, certain components that might not affect sonics, as they perform tasks [outside of the signal chain], like components in the bias circuit. But then, you have other factors like tolerance or reliability to think about. Personally, I think it is just easier to look at each seriously, and try to get at-least-decent parts for every function. Most often, the cost difference isn’t that much.”

To that end, Ceriatone came to its hand-wiring and hand-building of circuit boards simply because Nik feels such amps are both more reliable in the long term, and easier to service when they do need repair. “The thing about a PCB [printed circuit board] is,” he says, “it might be harder to repair; copper traces get lifted and there’s a penchant to use smaller components, or to fit things too tightly.

“On the other hand, there are some things that are just easier done on a PCB, like the common relay [for channel switching]. In a lot of our amps, we have multiple boards, with the main being [hand wired] turrets or eyelets, with smaller PCB daughter boards for certain functions.”

In some of its more affordable amps of recent years – the compact 2202 being one case in point – Ceriatone has even used high-quality PCBs for the main boards with the intention of offering a good product at an extremely affordable price to players shopping in that end of the market.

However, Ceriatone’s assemblers still use the same quality components and hand-loading and assembly techniques, the results of which bring the model to the UK at around £479 direct, plus shipping and VAT.

TIP OF THE CAP

As for those components themselves, Nik is adamant that quality and careful selection contribute to superior results at just about every turn in this department, too.

“Honestly,” he says, “I’m surprised when people say they cannot hear the difference, as long as all the ‘values’ are the same. Take the common coupling capacitor: yes, there is the capacitance value, which you can measure. But is that the only measurement people take, to claim that they are the same? There are many parameters in any capacitor and some of these are dynamic, depending on frequency and sometimes signal levels.

“It’s a neverending debate. In the end, people should just use whatever makes them happy. And this doesn’t mean the priciest capacitors are always the best. I use what works for me and I’d be foolish if I tried to get something

that I could not assure the supply of, as a manufacturer. For example, we use several different brands and types of coupling caps. I use the TAD Mustard capacitors, which I like, in some of the amps. In some other amps, we use 6PS or 418P Orange Drops. If I didn't think they differed, it would have been smarter for me to just use one type of coupling caps. And we do have capacitor manufacturers in Malaysia; it would be cheaper and easier to get them here, but we don't. And China's are even cheaper, but I still use what I like to use."

Otherwise, Ceriatone does turn to Malaysian suppliers when possible, but is strictly driven by a balance of quality and price, rather than just going the easier – and cheaper – road by buying local.

"As for workforce," Nik tells us, "we train our staff in-house. They do start with the very basics, like making the boards – drilling, staking turrets – before moving onto wiring the boards, and some of them graduate to building the amps. It's not just skills, but it's also about discipline and mentality. Building amps day in and day out might not be for everybody. So, the above progression can weed out those who can't do it. Most of our staff have been with us for more than five years and the amp builders have been with us for more than 10 years."

CENTURION CANDIDATE

Nik's thoughts were keenly focused on the veracity of both signal and electrolytic capacitors when planning the company's first pedal release recently and the results appear to have further proved his point about how much everything matters. The original Klon Centaur has arguably been cloned more than any other effects pedal in existence, and yet we might assume there's something behind the fact that originals still fetch upwards of £1,500 or more on the vintage market. So when Nik began his R&D for last year's Centura pedal, he figured he'd better go the extra mile.

"The Centura started with a post I saw on the internet," he says. "The guy was commenting on 'cloning' in a negative light, about us, but he was using a pedal that is based on the same pedal our Centura is based on, although not one with the same components, some of which are critical for the sound. He probably didn't even know, but the irony of it stayed with me.

"So, I set out to do the Centura with the same exact components as the original. Most of them are obsolete, so it was a global hunt, pretty much. I scoured surplus places, eBay, and called warehouses. That was definitely painful and took some months. And, for the enclosure, we went to a metal-casting company and had a mould made. That cost quite a lot, but there was no other way to get the shape and the looks right."

The fallout: Ceriatone has thus far shipped 3,000 units of the Centura pedal and has orders standing for many more. "And people tout the Centura as the most accurate clone there is. Because it is. Most of the components are exactly the same as the original. Sound-wise, people have made comparisons to the originals, with very favourable results. Those Panasonic M series electrolytics and the ECQ film caps, they were nothing special. They were all you could find, in some places, back in the 90s and early 2000s.

"But here's a case where the type of caps used worked favourably, because how else does one argue against the original fetching USD $2,500? It is not even about the sound, sometimes. It would be very sad, and incomplete, if music is just about sound. It's rock 'n' roll, baby!"

So as our chat draws to a close, we ask: what's in store for Ceriatone's future? More originality, to a great extent, yet always with a firm foundation in the classics that guitarists still crave.

"We're working on an amp catering to the heavy-metal crowd, but also some new releases of vintage-style amps. And we're releasing a double pedal – a two-in-one – which will combine the Centura with another classic pedal, with some extra features to improve and expand its functions. I'll probably call it the Centura+." G

BUILT FOR SPEED

THE ORAL HISTORY OF THE FENDER STRATOCASTER

Upon its introduction in 1954, the streamlined, futuristic lines of the Stratocaster must have seemed as far away from an archtop as a space rocket was from a station wagon. Read on as we chart the development of an icon of mid-century modern design and hear from the people who witnessed its development and evolution first-hand…

WORDS TONY BACON

This is the insider's story of the early days of the Stratocaster, Fender's solidbody electric guitar that, in 1954, followed the earlier Broadcaster/Telecaster and Esquire into the Californian company's catalogue. It was stunning: sleek and refined where the Telecaster was plain and workmanlike; a beautiful three-pickup solidbody with a clever vibrato system and a curvaceous look. The Strat would, of course, become an industry standard and in its first few decades, stirred up the music of players as diverse as Buddy Holly and Jimi Hendrix.

This history comes from the archive of interviews I've done over the years for my books about Fender. The people you'll hear from are: Jeff Beck, who got his first Strat in 1961, sold that, then turned from Lesters to Strats around 1968; Bill Carson, Western Swing guitarist, Fender 'guinea pig' in the 50s and, later, Fender salesman; George Fullerton, Fender employee from 1948 to 1970; Dale Hyatt, a Fender salesman from the mid 40s to the early 70s; Karl Olmsted, founder of Race & Olmsted, Fender's original tool-and-die maker; Don Randall, Fender's head of sales from 1953 to 1969; and Forrest White, Fender's head of production from 1954 to 1967.

BEGINNINGS OF THE STRATOCASTER

Forrest White

"At the time I started with Leo Fender in May 1954, the production was very low. They had the Telecaster, the Esquire, the Precision Bass. The Stratocaster had been designed, but there was no production yet – the first production run was in October of 1954. Each musician who came in the factory had his own idea of how things should sound. Bill Carson said that with the three different bridge sections on the Esquire and Telecaster, there was no way he could get proper intonation; he said there should be a separate bridge section for each string on the Stratocaster. No other guitar had that."

Don Randall

"All the guys want to say I designed this or I designed that, and one of the salesmen, Bill Carson, says he designed the Stratocaster. He really didn't have a thing to do with it. Freddie Tavares was Leo's helper in his shop. And the Stratocaster was brought about just as a necessary adjunct to the guitars we had, the Esquire and the Telecaster. We needed a fancier guitar, an upgrade guitar. I named the guitars: when the Stratocaster came along, they were talking about putting guys into orbit, so it was Telecaster, then Stratocaster – into the stratosphere."

Dale Hyatt

"They claim that Bill Carson is the one who invented the Strat. Didn't happen. They'd be a lot better off to say he had some input and I'm sure he did. Those things are usually the result of a combination of ideas from different people."

Bill Carson

"I didn't have the money to buy an amp and guitar outright, so Leo sold me a Telecaster and amp for 18 bucks a month, with the understanding that I would spend a few hours each week as a musical guinea pig. He wrote our agreement on a yellow tablet sheet and stuck it in an old rickety file cabinet and that was our contract.

OPPOSITE This transitional 1959 Stratocaster features an early slab fingerboard and a single-ply pickguard

ABOVE A 1954 Stratocaster headstock with most of its original decal intact

“I CAME TO WORK AT THE SHOP ONE MORNING AND LEO AND GEORGE FULLERTON HAD ROUGHED UP FOUR BODIES WITH DIFFERENT CONTOURS AND BODY RELIEFS. I PICKED ONE”

ABOVE This 1957 blonde-and-gold Mary Kaye Strat is an example of a very rare and sought-after variant

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT
Bill Carson offered Leo Fender valuable input about the practicalities of the Stratocaster’s design

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT
George Fullerton testing a Stratocaster on the factory floor in the 1950s

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM One of the first 50 Stratocasters ever produced, this 1954 is among the holiest of the Holy Grails

“I began to have trouble with the Telecaster, because of two strings going over a common bridge. You just cannot intonate that – you couldn’t then and you can’t now. I sawed mine in two and made me six bridges, and pretty clumsily propped up each half section with a striker strip from bookmatches, that little sandpaper grit to help hold it in place. So then I could intonate the instrument and play in tune.”

George Fullerton

“Freddie Tavares came in about the time the Stratocaster was being started and Bill Carson worked on the Stratocaster quite a bit. I think Freddie did some of the drawings on it and some of the final things.

“The Stratocaster was in the design idea before we moved from Pomona over to Raymond Avenue, the plans were already on the drawing board, and I think it was March ’53 we moved there. That picture of me on the line was taken at the new building, when the first Strat came out in ’54.

“Bill worked with Leo a great deal, ’specially on pickups, because he liked a certain kind of sound. He would come out when he had time, because he played music so wasn’t available very much. When he was here, he was out working with Leo. Leo’d make something and Bill would take it and try it on the job. So finally, I guess Leo was able to make a pickup that suited Bill’s hearing.

“There were several things about the Stratocaster that Bill liked. Bill claims to be the one that came up with the cutaway, and yet on the other hand, Leo gave Rex Gallion the credit for doing this. Rex was a big man and he complained that the body used to cut into him a lot. Course, Bill had the same idea, but Leo says Rex was the man who came in first. I’d give Bill credit for the pickup and maybe the individual bridge sections.”

Bill Carson

“I wanted a guitar with six bridges that would adjust vertically and horizontally, four pickups, body contours, a Bigsby-style headstock and a vibrato that would not only come back to exact string pitch after you’d sharped or flatted it, but also I wanted it to sharp or flat half a tone at least and hold the chord.

“And that was tough to do, according to Leo. We modified the Bigsby headstock – too ornate and hard to make – so it wound up much like you’ve seen it for the last several years. The four pickups became overkill and took too much space, so we dropped that to three.”

ORIGINAL CONTOUR BODY

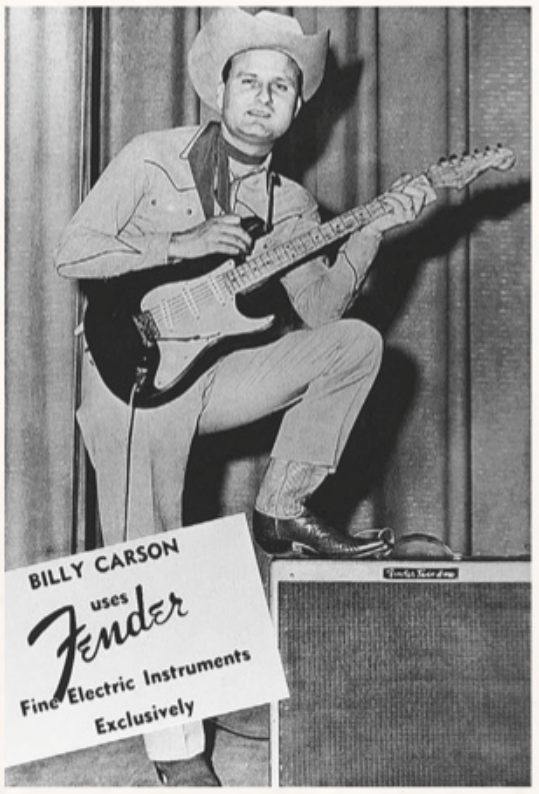
Don Randall

“Leo found out people complained that the sharp edge on the Telecaster was uncomfortable, so he rolled off that part of the body. He said when you hold it against your body, that sharp edge is kind of cutting in there, too, so he cut it away right there. Far more comfortable.

“You know, the Esquire and Telecaster are pretty ugly guitars when it comes right down to it. Let’s be frank about it, they were plain vanilla. In the days of Gibsons and things with bound necks and purfling, they were pretty ugly guitars. But we thought they were beautiful because we were making money with them. So the Stratocaster was born and the body was changed and the headstock was changed, a little more graceful, a little more lute-ish, by the way, a little more Paul Bigsby-ish, and a few natural changes came about.”

Bill Carson

“Long hours sitting on a stool in clubs and at studios with a Telecaster digging into my ribcage meant I stayed sore all the time from that square edge that it



had. Plus, the squared-off lower bout never really felt comfortable to my forearm, so that needed to be relieved.

"I came to work at the shop one morning and Leo and George Fullerton had roughed up four bodies with different contours and body reliefs. I picked out one that was closer to my idea and then a few days later, Leo had a very ugly but very playable guitar. It was at this point that Freddie Tavares came to work part-time for Leo. Freddie was one of the best musicians I have ever known, and just as good at engineering. A very talented man."

SYNCHRONIZED TREMOLO, RECESSED JACK

Don Randall

"The tremolo [Fender's term for the vibrato] was Leo's pride and joy. That was his idea from way back when – he was working on a way of bending the strings. It was his design. "

George Fullerton

"The first vibrato unit on the Stratocaster was all designed and Bill worked with Leo and some other people – I think Freddie really worked with Leo on this vibrato. It was decided it would be built, and tooling was purchased, parts made. And when that first one came off the line, I grabbed it and it was terrible. Sounded terrible, sounded tinny, wouldn't sustain sound.

"I rushed down to the lab there and I said Leo – it was all set up for production – I said we've got to stop this. That whole thing was thrown out! All the parts, all the tooling, many thousands of dollars. It had to be redesigned, not only to sustain notes, but also to give a solid sound.

"And that's why the Stratocaster didn't come out as soon as it should have, even though it was already advertised. There was a lapse between that time until it actually came out, because they were retooling the vibrato."

Karl Olmsted

"We made several of the tremolo bridges. The little saddle was a problem, we had a heck of a time getting something developed that was practical to make, to mass produce, that worked the way Leo wanted it to. It has little adjustment screws in there to get the height that you need and Leo wanted the string-length adjustment to be exact, because according to him, if you couldn't get it so many thousandths it was not the right sound. So something that looks simple wound up being quite a development.

"You'd have to keep making a trade-off with Leo. He'd say how he wanted the tremolo base plate and you'd say: 'Well, we can't do this – you can't have it bent that close to a hole and not have it distort.' The bridge cover was also a lot of work to get something that made him happy.

“WHEN HENDRIX CAME ALONG... WE COULDN’T BUILD ENOUGH OF THEM. [HE] CAUSED MORE STRATOCASTERS TO BE SOLD THAN ALL THE FENDER SALESMEN PUT TOGETHER”

ABOVE To the 14-year-old Jeff Beck, seeing a Stratocaster in a shop window in London was a mind-blowing experience

“The sad thing was that all the trouble we went to develop that and make him happy and then 90 per cent of the guitar players took it off and threw it in the trash [laughs]. And to drill the holes through the metal tremolo block, it’s a costly deal to do. So we had some cast, but they didn’t work out and we went back to the drilling.

“The tremolo arm took more development than you’d think. There weren’t many tremolos around and they usually had stationary handles. But Leo wanted one that would do the job, said the guitarist might want to put it out of the way. He would say boy, this angle has to be just right. He’d say: ‘That just don’t feel right.’ And I’d say [laughs]: ‘Who’s gonna know the difference?’”

Bill Carson

“George Fullerton said we’ve wrecked so many Telecaster jacks by guys stepping on the cord, why don’t we put a front-mounted jack on it, so that if you step on the cord it won’t wreck that input jack? So that jack was George’s idea, and a good one.

“Pickup design was a matter of trial and error with magnet and wire size and amount of turns, and since Freddie was a good player and we both needed the same thing, it didn’t take us long to decide what was needed for pickup sound.”

Karl Olmsted

“With the jack, Leo didn’t want something to stick in the side, he wanted something developed that would be a shape that would let the plug come out at an angle, something that could practically be drawn without breaking.”

GLEN AND JIMI

Dale Hyatt

“When guys like Jimi Hendrix come along, playing all that wild stuff, then we couldn’t build enough of them. As a matter of fact, I think Jimi Hendrix caused more Stratocasters to be sold than all the Fender salesmen put together.

“And as a matter of fact, he was not one of my favourite musicians [laughs]. I never could get with it. To me, it sounded like a bunch of junk. I have to hear a melody, to be pleasing. I’m still the same today.”

Don Randall

“We had events where we showed our products and when we closed the display there were always hangers-on that wanted to come and jam. We had some terrific jam sessions. One afternoon – this was somewhere in the 60s – there was Thumbs Carllile and some other guys and this fella came in and wanted to know if he could sit in with them. I said: ‘Sure you can, that’s what it’s for.’ I’m telling you, he blew me away. And Thumbs Carllile is no slouch – he’s a good jazz player as well as country.

“So this guy and Thumbs start trying to outdo each other, going wild. One would take a chorus and then the other would take a chorus, this went on about 20 minutes, just killing each other. And the guy was Glen Campbell, practically unknown at the time: he was playing at the Pomona bowling alley. I thought I’ve got to have this guy – I was doing all the artists relations work, too. It was really a one-man show, you know, very tight, very frugal [laughs].

“So I started talking to Glen, said we’d like to have you playing our guitar, what would you like to have? And he said: ‘Oh gosh, I don’t know. I like that purple guitar that Hank Penny had.’ I said: ‘You got it, I’ll get you one.’ I had a purple Stratocaster made for Glen Campbell, got it to him… and I’ve never seen him since and I’ve never heard him play that guitar!

“The next time I saw him, he started getting popular, he was on TV playing a Japanese Teisco

guitar, a horrible, awful thing. I never did see him play our guitar. It was really my fault, I should have followed it up."

THE ALL-TIME ROCK GUITAR

Jeff Beck

"The reason I left school was because of that guitar [laughs]. I mean, that is brain damage when you're a kid of 14 and you see that. It's just a piece of equipment that you dream about touching, never mind owning. The first day I stood in Lew Davis or one of them London shops, I just went into a trance and I got the wrong bus home, just dreaming about it, you know?

"It just blew my brains apart, and it's never been any different since. It's taken me all round the world and given me everything I've got, just that Strat, really. So it is a particular favourite of mine.

"I had a catalogue way before then, which I used to look at, an American one from Fender when it was in Fullerton. It was on a ritzy looking paper, and I thought, 'These guitars have got to be about a thousand quid.' And then I found out they were only £147. I thought, 'Well, I can see myself being able to get hold of the money, if I sold everything I had.' In the end, I got my first one on HP.

"I got fed up of having to have repairs made to my Les Pauls and I suppose I turned to a Strat in emergency one night and just never went back. This would have been during the Rod Stewart period. I used to play this Les Paul '59, but I think it was when we did *Beck-Ola* that I got fed up with it: in the studio, it didn't sound a lot different to the John Mayall's Bluesbreakers.

"Lovely sound, but every track ends up sounding very similar. The Strat seemed to respond more to my aggressive playing than the Les Paul did; the Les Paul just sounds dreadful if you start hitting it.

"And the vibrato – it's like the gear stick on a car, you have to have it. I jammed with Eric once and unbeknownst to me, he handed me his Strat, the black one he uses and I think he has the vibrato arm glued down. He never ever dreamt of using it. And I think with a Strat, that's the beauty of it. The tonal flexibility of that bar: you can play a phrase and lower it and raise it and wang it. It becomes a whole different ball game with that on.

"I used to have fun balancing the pickup switch in between the two. When I was a kid with my first Fender, I thought I'd fry something up electronically by doing it, but you soon get to know that it's a simple toggle that spans two holes instead of one, so you're getting two pickups. I always thought I was doing something irreparable!

"No one else got that sound – and then I heard Gene Vincent records, which had to have that combination. It was so wildly modulated, there's no way Johnny Meeks could have got that unless it was switched to the front two or the back two pickups. It was Johnny Meeks that turned me on to the Strat in the first place, my chief influence on the Strat.

"No kids are saying: 'What's that old guitar, ain't you got a new one?' It still looks futuristic, still an unbeatable shape, as is the Tele. I don't think you can improve on those two guitars, the all-time great rock guitars."

ANOTHER REMARKABLE FENDER FIRST

Bill Carson

"So, now I had a good playable guitar that was doing me well for session and club work. Some of the other players, especially the big-box jazz players of that time, they were pretty snide about what they called the electric pork chop, or boat paddle with strings.

"These guys were purists, and for the most part they played big Gibson and Epiphone guitars. But it wasn't very long before these same guys were after a Telecaster or Strat to get the sound that was rapidly becoming extremely popular."

George Fullerton

"The first three instruments we came out with, the Broadcaster/Telecaster, the Precision, and the Stratocaster, are still the basic instruments of the world, the most copied, the most desired, the most sold. That must be a record that no one can equal. For me, it's a feeling of accomplishment, if you can call it accomplishment, because no one will equal that, in any field.

"Can you imagine today how many people made good livings, supported families, on those three instruments? It's mind boggling to look at all this and know that we were the ones who got the thing rolling. I'm pleased and thankful to have been part of that. And those old instruments, well, it's amazing what they sell for." G

BELOW The Stratocaster's distinctive headstock was influenced by the Paul Bigsby design

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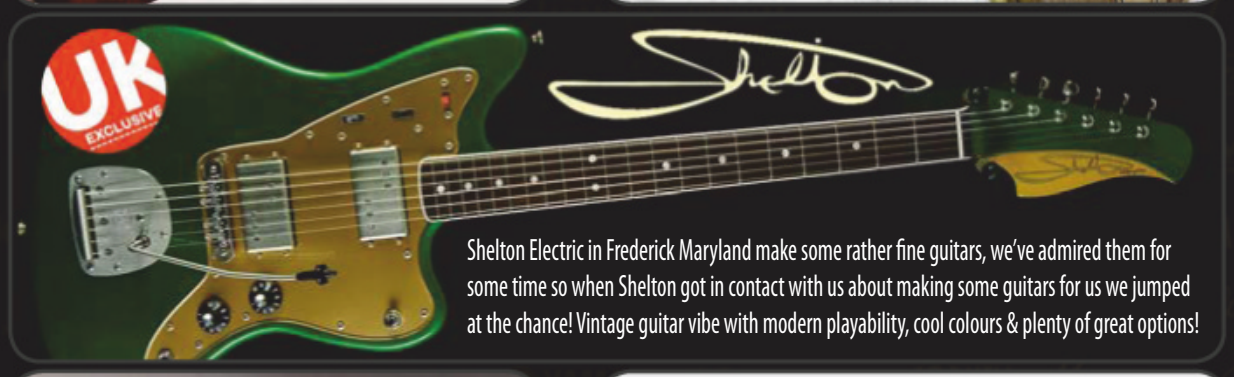

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MACMULL CUSTOM GUITARS

DIAMOND SUPERLIGHT S-CLASSIC & HEARTBREAKER CUSTOM

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

This Israeli guitar brand goes further than most in pursuit of vintage guitar tone. Does the end justify the spend?

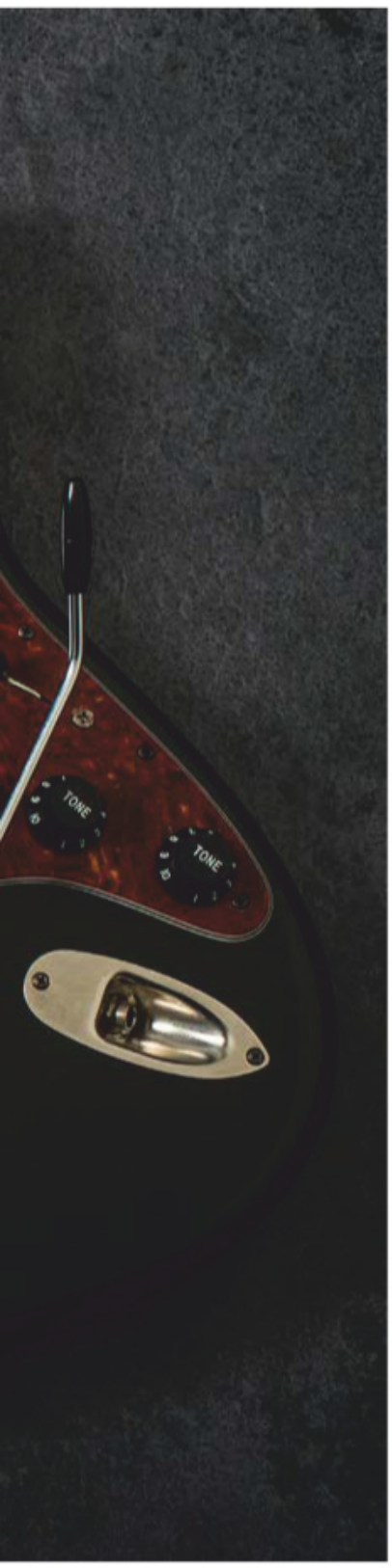
You'd be forgiven for thinking that the world needs another set of boutique Strat and Tele clones like it needs a catastrophic asteroid impact, but five minutes with either of these instruments might just change your mind. What makes them different? For Macmull, it all starts with wood.

The brainchild of luthier Tal Macmull, producer/sound engineer Amit Sadras and pro guitarist Sharon Levi, Macmull Custom Guitars is based in Jerusalem, but its high-end wares were brought to our attention by The North American Guitar in London. The range currently comprises S- and T-style models and while the Superlight S-Classic on test here is an obvious homage to Fullerton's golden era, the eye-catching two-tone Heartbreaker Custom has more of a hotrod, Cabronita aesthetic.

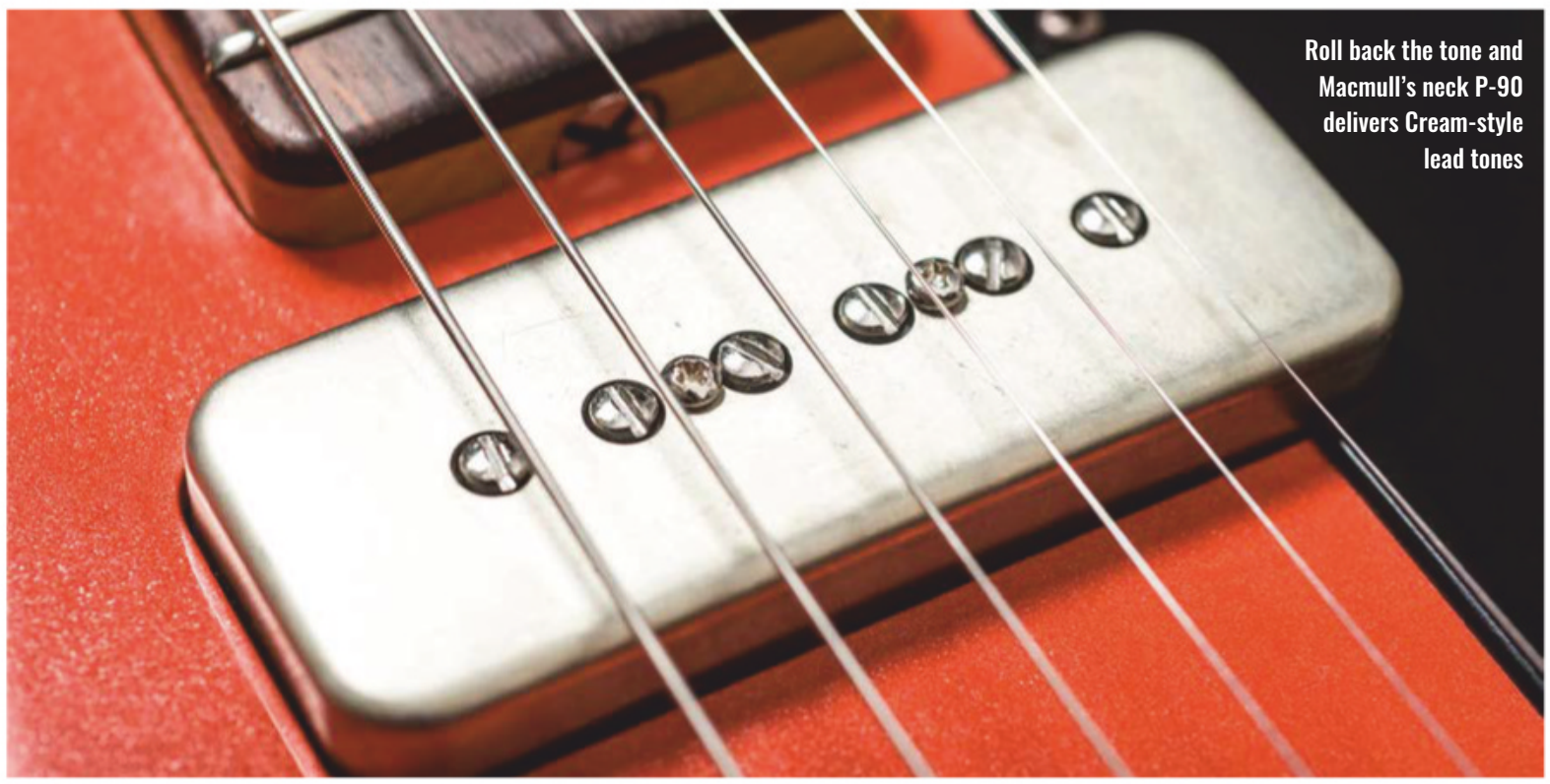
The Macmull team prides itself on its rigorous wood-selection criteria. In addition to hand-picking old-growth timber that's light in weight and kiln-dried, the wood's age when it was cut, its grain and texture are also regarded as key factors by the company. "We strongly believe that a wooden instrument has to be light weight in order to be dry-sounding and punchy with very sharp attack," says Sharon Levi. "That is the starting point to all of our guitars. Our Superlight model is the lightest we can consistently produce. On the S-Classic, for example, we keep them below 3.25kg. The next range for all guitars is between 3.25-3.45kg. We do not use anything heavier than this, since we feel that is where you start losing tone."

Owners of weighty early Blackguard Telecasters might disagree (and there are plenty), but Macmull's meticulous process doesn't end on the weighing scales. After the wood has been selected, the Macmull team start working according to what they've dubbed the RVT system, which stands for 'real vintage tone'. This includes "matching the necks to the bodies in a way that they complete and support each other throughout the EQ spectrum".

"The goal is to bring those voice-like midrange frequencies and the oh-so-elusive high-mids and 'analogue' trebles, while keeping the bass punchy and very tight," Levi explains. "No set of electronics will give you that unless the body will resonate



The Heartbreaker Custom's trio of threaded steel saddles



Roll back the tone and Macmull's neck P-90 delivers Cream-style lead tones

in those frequencies. In other words, it's not only about the wood, it's also about the way it is handled and constructed."

Macmull has also discovered that the path to 'real vintage tone' doesn't necessarily involve the exact replication of pre-CBS processes.

"We have our own measures of construction and we tweaked them to perfection," says Levi. "They are *not* a copy of the common vintage spec, since we felt we can actually improve the punch and balance of our instruments over those vintage ones.

"That said, we are not magicians and sometimes a piece of wood just doesn't like 'living' as a guitar body, even after all the knowledge we have. In these cases, we will humbly put it aside and start over with a different wood."

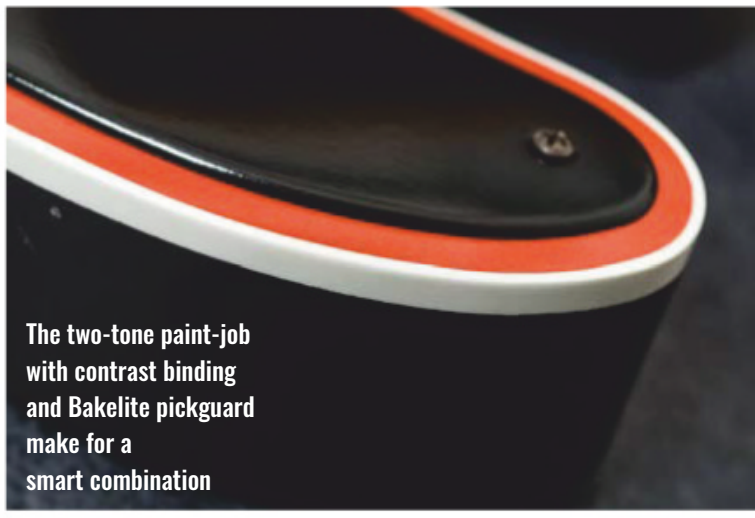
You've probably gathered by now that the Macmull Custom Guitars team sweats the small stuff. When it comes to electronics, it's not just a matter of grabbing some boutique pickups out of the parts cupboard – Macmull winds its own. "The pickups are just microphones," Levi asserts. "Like any good microphone, they need to be organic and reflect the true wooden sound of the guitar.

"Just like choosing the right mic for a specific person, we match the pickup set to each guitar individually."

To do that, the company chooses from a variety of alnico magnets and wire gauges, aiming to end up with a medium output that allows for plenty of headroom when you turn up the amplifier.

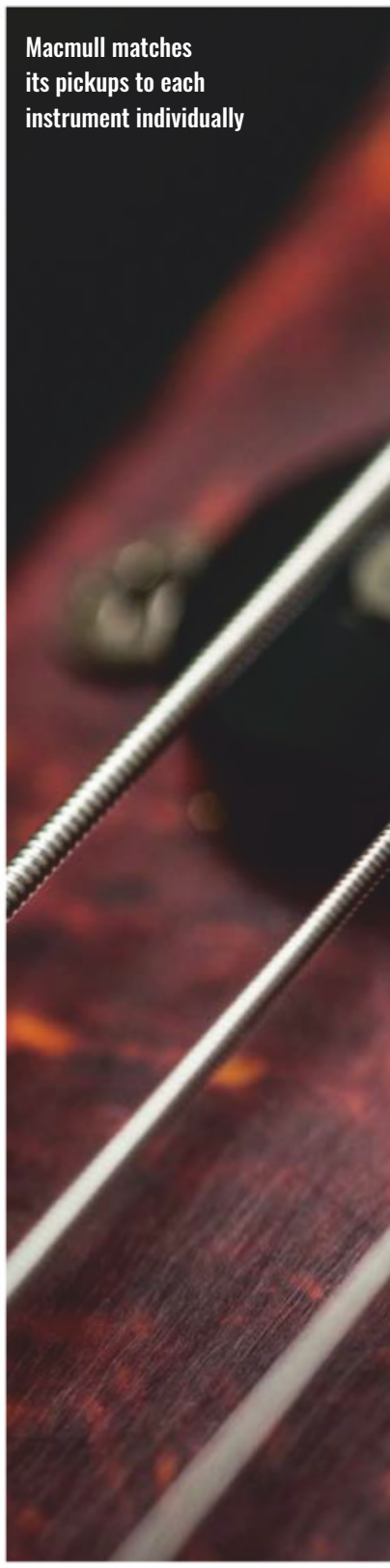
But it all comes back to the wood: "Each type of alnico will produce a different frequency response," says Levi. "We set those not to colour or interfere with the true nature of the wood.

"Our goal is to keep the predicted wood sound and not colour it with a fancy set of pre-voiced pickups. When parts are working together we get a consistent and a healthy instrument. All parts – pickups, wires, pots and caps – are also carefully picked by value to maintain the original wood sound."



The two-tone paint-job with contrast binding and Bakelite pickguard make for a smart combination

Heartbreaker by name, Heartbreaker by nature. Play one and you'll find out!



Macmull matches its pickups to each instrument individually

HANDS ON

It's perhaps ironic that this painstaking approach to instrument-building is being applied to guitars whose 1950s forerunners were designed specifically for mass production. However, pulling our review models from their cases (a vintage-style 'poodle' case for the Heartbreaker and a rectangular early 60s style for the S-Classic, both covered in brown vinyl) quickly extinguishes any cynicism.

Both guitars are within the specified weight ranges (3.13kg/6.90lb for the S-Classic and 3.32kg/7.32lb for the Heartbreaker Custom) and feature very light factory ageing with a smattering of small dings. Fine lacquer checking is visible on close inspection, but it's all very restrained and shouldn't offend the relic haters too much.

Even renowned boutique makers are sometimes guilty of using cheap-looking plastics, but there's nothing like that here. It's a case of 'better the bevel you know', as both pickguards nod to the past.

The red tortoiseshell celluloid 'guard pops nicely against the S-Classic's black finish, while its black pickup covers and knobs give the guitar a custom vibe. The Heartbreaker's black back and sides and bound Royal Orange metallic top are complemented by a cut-down, four-screw plate in suitably retro Bakelite.

The S-Classic comes undrilled for a rear spring-cavity cover – many players argue that their Strats have an airier and more resonant tone with the cover off and the Macmull guys are obviously in agreement.

The daring lines of the headstock design may modernistic, but we like it, especially combined here with faux-bound edges and white tuner buttons. It's savvy, too – when most of what's going on at the other end of the neck is in thrall to the past, you have to find a way to differentiate your branding, giving it the instant recognition that helps sell guitars when your instruments are seen in the hands of rockstars and influencers.

Both one-piece maple necks have nicely rounded C-profiles. The Heartbreaker's slightly deeper neck carve features a full-gloss nitrocellulose finish with a vintage tint, while the S-Classic has been sanded back to simulate playwear. From halfway between the nut and first fret, right up to the area behind the 13th fret, the back of the neck has been treated to resemble the grey, oxidised look of an old and much-played Fender.

There's a sumptuous, silky smooth feel, and the fingerboard edges and 6105 frets have been treated to a generous rollover on both guitars. It's extremely comfortable but something you may have to adjust to if you have a wide vibrato technique – the trade-off for those soft edges is that your low and high E strings can be more prone to slipping over the fret ends.

As supplied, there's also a small amount of choke-out when executing full-tone bends around the 14-17th fret on the S-Classic's high E string.

The guitar arrived with slinky low action and temperature changes do cause wood to move around in transit, but at this price,

prospective buyers will rightly expect a flawless performance.

Nevertheless, it's nothing a guitar tech can't solve in short order and in terms of feel, these Macmulls are up there with the very best new bolt-ons we've encountered in recent years. With their 6105 wire, 9.5-inch radius Madagascar rosewood slab 'boards and broken-in edges, they feel much closer to an old Fender that's had a refret than a brand-new instrument, and it's no bad thing.

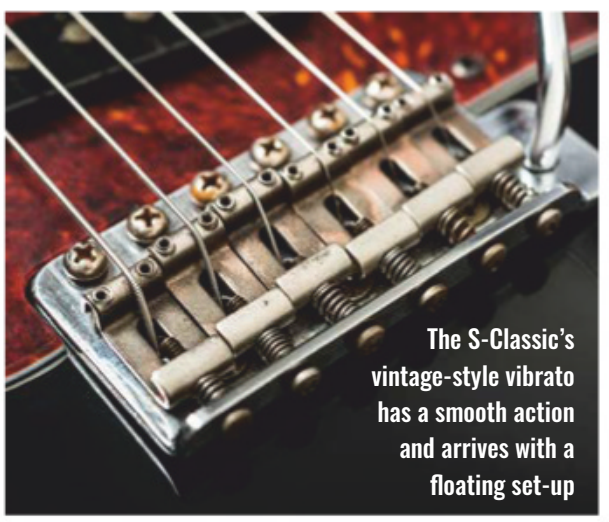
IN USE

Perhaps it's that sparkling Royal Orange top, but the Heartbreaker Custom's siren song is calling and as a result, it's the first Macmull we choose to plug in. We're informed that the idea for this guitar stemmed from company founders Tal and Amit testing their RVT system to see if it could deliver clarity with P-90 pickups.

"This would have been an ultimate test, since those pickups are like wild horses," says Sharon. It's immediately obvious that test was passed with flying colours as the Heartbreaker's P-90s deliver plenty of articulation and clarity, without taming the bucking bronco ride that makes this type of pickup so appealing in the first place.

Combined with bespoke pickups and premium components – in particular the Luxe Bumblebee .22uF tone cap – the Heartbreaker's simple array of controls can deliver an extraordinary range of inspiring tones. Try rolling the tone control off with a rasp of tweedy overdrive dialled in on the amp and flip to the neck position – where many guitars would be unusably woolly, single notes here are rich and complex, with a prominent 'woo' vowel sound that's evocative of Cream-era Clapton and available all over the fretboard.

Tune to open G and it's deliciously swampy, and as you roll a little treble back into the mix, the sounds get throatier and rawer. It's dynamite for slide playing and we're also reminded of the Junior Kimbrough-influenced section of Dan Auerbach's back catalogue. We're a



The S-Classic's vintage-style vibrato has a smooth action and arrives with a floating set-up

Macmull's modernistic headstock is accentuated by faux binding

long way from the pawnshop, but the Heartbreaker still nails garage-blues tones.

Switching over to the S-Classic hollows out the midrange and adds the kind of angelic upper-harmonic halo you'd expect from, well, a great slab-board Stratocaster. All five switch positions are distinct yet perfectly balanced, without the kind of extremes that make it difficult to dial in an amp tone that works well for all.

The in-between settings hold their own, are never scratchy and from positions one to five, there's the explosive dynamic range, air, depth and complexity of tone that vintage Stratocaster fans crave.

Comparing the S-Classic and Heartbreaker side-by-side, the single-cutaway guitar sustains for longer and offers a more vocal midrange, while the S-Classic is less compressed and a more expressive lead instrument. If the S-Classic is Mark Knopfler and John Mayer, the Heartbreaker Custom is Keith Richards and Mike Campbell.

However, the Heartbreaker is still full of spank and it can even sound Hendrix-y with the right approach. Its accent is more like that of a fat Tele than an LP Special, but however you categorise it, it's a spectacular thing to behold. A Heartbreaker indeed.

Both of these instruments have clearly been conceived and built by people who have put a great deal of time and effort into discovering what makes the best vintage Fenders tick. There's no getting away from the fact that the pricing is up there in Fender Masterbuilt territory and beyond – realistically, you could buy a pair of team-built Custom Shop Strats for the price of the S-Classic, or even track down a player-grade 60s Fender with a refinish.

That said, given the chance to test-drive a vintage original, many players would find the Macmull S-Classic an easier ride. It's one of the handful of guitars with which almost everything you try 'comes off' and as such, it encourages you to step outside those well-trodden boxes. Ultimately, that can only be a good thing.

Elsewhere in the market, you can find a guitar with a similarly superlative neck from a Custom Shop Master Builder such as Dale Wilson, or Dennis Fano's Novo stable, but there aren't too many others that we'd put in the same bracket. Macmull's burgeoning reputation for fine electric guitars is thoroughly deserved and we can't wait to see what the company does next.

KEY FEATURES

DIAMOND SUPERLIGHT S-CLASSIC
PRICE £7,250 (inc. hard case)
DESCRIPTION Double-cutaway solidbody electric guitar. Made in Israel
BUILD Alder body, bolt-on hard maple neck, Madagascar rosewood 9.5" radius fingerboard with clay dot inlays, 21 Dunlop 6105 frets, bone nut, single-action truss rod
HARDWARE 6-saddle vintage-style vibrato bridge, Gotoh vintage-style tuners
ELECTRICS 3x Macmull matched RVT single-coil pickups, 5-way blade selector switch, Luxe .47uF tone cap, CTS volume and tone pots
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42.2mm at nut, 51.3mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.5mm at first fret, 23.3mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.0mm at nut, 55.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.13kg/6.90lb
FINISH Black nitrocellulose

8/10 **The price may be stratospheric, but so are the S-Classic's tones and feel**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fender Custom Shop Paul Waller Masterbuilt 61 Relic Strat **£4,699**, Novo Serus S **£2,999**, PRS Silver Sky **£2,299**

KEY FEATURES

HEARTBREAKER CUSTOM
PRICE £4,495 (inc. hard case)
DESCRIPTION Single-cutaway solidbody electric guitar. Made in Israel
BUILD Bound one-piece alder body, bolt-on hard maple neck, Madagascar rosewood 9.5" radius fingerboard with clay dot inlays, 21 Dunlop 6105 frets, bone nut, single-action truss rod
HARDWARE T-Classic hardtail bridge with top-loading or string-through stringing and 3x threaded steel saddles, Gotoh vintage-style tuners
ELECTRICS 2x Macmull matched RVT P-90 pickups, 3-way blade selector switch, Luxe Bumblebee .22uF tone cap, CTS volume and tone pots
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42.5mm at nut, 51.8mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.6mm at first fret, 23.7mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 34.8mm at nut, 54.7mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.32kg/7.32lb
FINISH Royal Orange nitrocellulose
CONTACT The North American Guitar thenorthamericanguitar.com, macmull-guitars.com

9/10 **Style and substance from a guitar that sounds as good as it looks**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fender Custom Shop Ron Thorn Masterbuilt 60 Tele **£6,499**, Friedman Vintage-T **£2,299**, Novo Serus T **£2,899**

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Roasted Mahogany Neck
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SHERGOLD

STERLING BY MUSIC MAN
CUTLASS SSS & HSS

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

These budget solidbodies have a pedigree that stretches all the way back to Leo Fender himself, in a roundabout way. Are they worthy alternatives to the usual S-types?

There are many reasons why you might want to buy a Stratocaster-derived guitar that isn't actually a Strat. You might like the way another maker has updated the design, you might want a name that helps you stand out… or you might just want to save a few quid for that full-body Ariana Grande tattoo you've been promising yourself.

These two guitars meet all those criteria – with the added bonus of a historical link to Leo Fender. Available with the traditional three single coils or with a humbucker in the bridge position, this is the 2019 Sterling version of the Music Man Cutlass. The scratchplate shape and 4+2 headstock ensure it doesn't look too much like the original three-pickup solidbody, while Indonesian manufacture allows it to undercut all the rivals listed at the end of this review. Ariana, here we come.

Leo Fender may only have been involved with Music Man for four years in the late 1970s before he went off to start G&L, but there are echoes of his first post-Fender design, the six-string StingRay, in the curvaceous form of the Cutlass. And in looks at least, there's very little difference between these budget instruments and their US-made parent models.

We love the slightly offset body shape, and the rounded top of the scratchplate that suggests a Strat sneakily morphing into a Tele. The asymmetrical headstock might be more divisive, especially for those of us who can never get used to having the G and B tuners on opposite sides, but you can't deny its space-saving logic. There's no such head-scratching required with the electrics: a five-way blade selector offers the usual pickup combinations, but there's only one master tone control.

Of course, if you're paying around 20 per cent of the price of an American Music Man, you can expect compromises. So these Cutlasses have poplar bodies instead of alder, more basic hardware and unnamed pickups. There's also a much more limited colour range, with just two options for each model: Charcoal Frost or Daphne Blue for the SSS, Vintage Cream or Stealth Black for the HSS. Oh, and while both necks are maple, the darker fretboard isn't rosewood, it's laurel.

Finish quality is really quite decent, as we've now come to expect from factories outside the usual guitar-building heartlands,

The Cutlass HSS has a maple fingerboard, while the 'board of the SSS is laurel

but there are one or two signs of cost-saving. The metallic paint on the SSS has some blotchiness in the lower cutaway, and the ends of the upper frets on both instruments are a little snaggy – 200mph shredders with delicate fingers, beware.

One more feature carried over from the pricier Cutlasses is the truss-rod adjustment wheel at the top end of the neck. It's not exactly elegant, but it makes for easy tweaks to neck tension using the included (and disconcertingly bendy) four-inch metal rod.

IN USE

On paper, poplar plus laurel should be a solid but unexciting variation on alder plus rosewood – we're not bracing ourselves for a life-changing blast of tonal thrills with the Cutlass SSS. But there's certainly nothing wrong with its acoustic voice, which is pleasant in a lightweight, restrained kind of way.

What's surprising is the contrast between this and the HSS model with its all-maple neck. You might expect the maple 'board

The single-coil pickups are voiced on the punchy side

Both Cutlass models on review feature a two-point vibrato bridge

The space-saving headstocks offer a straight string path

to make things more zingy, but this one's markedly fuller and deeper. It's not all about the fretboards, of course – knuckle-tap testing suggests this body is just a more resonant lump of timber.

Through a clean amp, the guitar with three single coils sounds well-balanced, sweet… and rather loud. There's an impressive amount of natural sustain, but on the neck pickup at least, it's a bit of a blunt instrument. Turning the volume knob down to eight opens things up, letting some single-coil snappiness into the equation, but an even better move is to flip to the middle pickup – it's still on the hot side, but there's so much phasey cluck here that for a moment, we wonder if we've slipped into one of the in-between positions.

The bridge pickup is extremely bright and breezy and this is where you run into the limitations of the single tone control: in this position, you might well want it turned down to six or seven, but if you then switch back to one of the other four settings, it's going to sound muddy.

The bigger acoustic voice of our HSS guitar, coupled with the same beefy middle and neck pickups, can make it sound even more dense – but the humbucker fits in well here, and balances nicely with the two single coils in both tone and output level. Again, it sounds more articulate and likeable if you pull back on the volume, but for bashing out overdriven powerchords that might not be necessary.

Both guitars are nice enough players, thanks to easy satin-finished necks, gently curved neck-join heels and solid factory set-ups. We're a little concerned about the two-pivot vibrato bridges, though. Both arms are rattly and in the case of our Cutlass SSS, the action is so stiff as to make gentle wobbles all but impossible. Also, the bridge itself sits flat against the body, leaving the intonation screws angled up at an alarmingly sharp angle.

Should we remove a tension spring to loosen things up a bit? Based on the behaviour of the HSS's bridge, no. This one's spring-retaining claw hasn't been

screwed in quite so deeply, resulting in a less rigid feel… and, as a consequence, some issues with returning to pitch.

On balance, we'd take the stiffness – and it's an easy adjustment to make – but it is a potential complication to be aware of when buying in this price bracket, where hardware is never going to be of the highest quality. The moral, perhaps, is that 'try before you buy' is just as important with budget guitars as it is with boutique wallet-slayers.

Truss-rod access is quick and convenient

KEY FEATURES

CUTLASS SSS
PRICE £349
DESCRIPTION Solidbody double-cutaway electric guitar. Made in Indonesia
BUILD Solid poplar body, five-bolt maple neck, laurel fingerboard with 12" radius, 22 narrow frets
HARDWARE Two-point vibrato bridge with screw-in arm, vintage-style tuners
ELECTRICS Three single-coil pickups, five-way switch, master volume and tone controls
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22mm at first fret, 24.5mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.5kg/7.7lb
FINISHES Charcoal Frost (as reviewed), Daphne Blue
LEFT-HANDERS No

8/10 **A low-cost Strat alternative with pickups that err on the chunky side**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Squier Classic Vibe '70s Stratocaster **£379**, Fender Player Stratocaster **£559**, G&L Tribute Legacy **£449**

KEY FEATURES

CUTLASS HSS
PRICE £349
DESCRIPTION Solidbody double-cutaway electric guitar. Made in Indonesia
BUILD Solid poplar body, five-bolt maple neck, maple fingerboard with 12" radius, 22 narrow frets
HARDWARE Two-point vibrato bridge with screw-in arm, vintage-style tuners
ELECTRICS One humbucker and two single-coil pickups, five-way switch, master volume and tone controls
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.5mm at first fret, 24.5mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.5kg/7.7lb
FINISHES Vintage Cream (as reviewed), Stealth Black
LEFT-HANDERS No
CONTACT Strings & Things
stringsandthings.co.uk, sterlingbymusicman.com

8/10 **The bridge humbucker makes this a fun little all-round rocker**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Squier Classic Vibe '70s Stratocaster HSS **£379**, Fender Player Stratocaster HSS **£599**, G&L Tribute Legacy HSS **£479**

SHERGOLD
PROVOCATEUR SP02-SD

WORDS JOSH GARDNER

The revived British brand returns with an all-new body shape and a scale-length adjustment, promising versatility and quality for those looking for something a little bit different…

It's been two years since Barnes & Mullins enlisted the help of luthier Patrick James Eggle to revive cult Brit brand Shergold, reviving the double-cut Masquerader in a variety of configurations for guitarists in the market for something different to the norm.

While we were suitably impressed with the original Masquerader's fabulous hand-burnished, solid rosewood neck, its body shape – heavily informed by the 70s original – wasn't universally beloved. Enter then, the brand-new Provocateur, a design that retains many of the Masquerader's more individual design choices, but with a single-cut body that feels more crowd-pleasing.

Indeed, with its prominent body carve and large Tele Deluxe-style extended scratchplate, it certainly gives off a modern boutique vibe – especially in this Battleship Grey finish with cream pickguard and vintage-style silver-capped top-hat knobs.

At first glance, the neck seems to have been lifted directly from the Masquerader, complete with the paddle-shaped headstock with inset metal badge, but there are some important differences. Instead of solid rosewood, the Provocateur has a more CITES-friendly torrefied mahogany neck with an ebony fingerboard.

Another big change is the scale length – while the Masquerader opted for a Fender-style 25.5-inch scale, here we've switched to 24.6 inches. Combined with the 12-inch fretboard radius, this lends a Gibson-like feel, despite the bolt-on neck.

Elsewhere, on the hardware front, the Masquerader's Eggle-designed T-style bridge returns in chopped form (with compensated brass saddles and through-body or top-loading stringing options), as do the staggered-post locking tuners – though the tulip buttons coordinate with the scratchplate this time around.

Pickups are two Seymour Duncan '59s with cream-and-black zebra bobbins – the neck unit is scratchplate-mounted, while the bridge humbucker is screwed directly into the guitar's mahogany body. When it comes to electronics, we have a three-way toggle with single volume and tone knobs, the latter hiding a push-pull switch to activate a coil-split on both pickups.

IN USE

While the vibe here is definitely more Gibson than Fender, the T-style bridge

A pair of Seymour Duncan ’59s offer a surprisingly wide range of tones

The Shergold Custom T bridge offers both string-through and top-loading options

and bolt-on neck add some sparkle to the guitar’s acoustic resonance when played unplugged. The neck is a nice handful without getting into telegraph-pole territory, with a very slight V to the profile that makes it sit nicely in the hand.

This is helped by the almost acoustic-like hand-burnished finish on the back of the neck – silky without being slippy and paired with some nicely rolled fret-ends, it makes for a smooth playing experience up and down the neck.

Strapping on the Provocateur, though the dainty aluminum strap buttons would *not* make us comfortable throwing this guitar around with wild abandon, it proves nicely balanced. Weight-wise, it’s more Tele than Les Paul, at around seven pounds.

You probably know what a Duncan ’59 in a solid mahogany single-cut sounds like – it’s a far from unique combo. But the ’59 is popular for a reason and both pickups offer a nice mix of high-output humbucker-y goodness with a modern sheen that begs to be paired with loads of gain.

SHERGOLD PROVOCATEUR SP01-SD

For fans of a different kind of grunt, Shergold has also released the Provocateur SP01-SD (£829). Identical to the SP02 in every way bar the pickups, the SP01 ditches the Seymour Duncan ’59s in favour of a Pearly Gates humbucker at the bridge and an SP90 in the neck.

Things are still undeniably raw and rocky here, particularly from the Pearly Gates – those brass saddles give it a punch and grind that can at times become overpowering as you add lashings of gain. The SP90 is a little woolly in isolation, but works nicely when paired with the bridge pickup to clean things up. Again, the coil-split setting on the humbucker is a tad shrill, but it pairs well enough with the P-90 and overall, gives the guitar more of an SG Special feel than its LP-meets-Tele sibling.

The headstock outline is the same as the 2017 Masquerader model

That said, the middle position is a welcome surprise – it has a warm, chiming tonality that's perfect for gently picked clean lines with the tone rolled back.

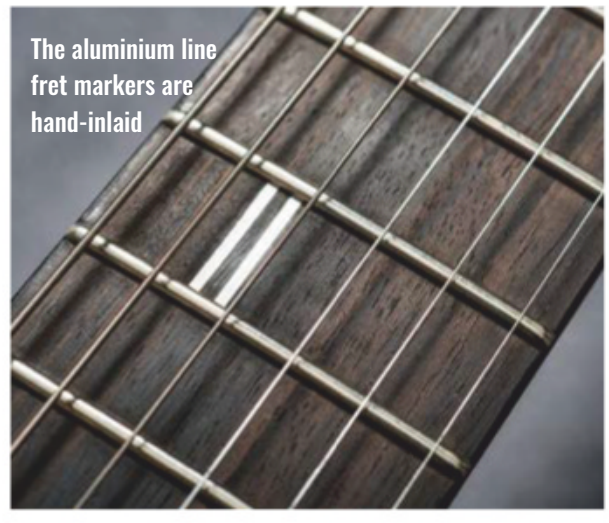
Pulling up the tone pot and engaging the coil split offers versatility, but for more subtle single-coil sounds, while easing back the tone control does take a little edge off, it's a touch weedy for our tastes.

If the Masquerader was Shergold reinventing its heritage, the Provocateur feels like a confident step into the future. While we still wince at an £800 guitar that doesn't come with a gigbag, everything else about this guitar does the business. With its excellent build quality and crowd-pleasing tones from name-brand pickups, it's a rock-ready and quirky single-cut.

8/10 **A well-sorted single-cut that offers a wide range of tones with looks that set it apart**

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £809
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar. Made in Indonesia (set up in UK)
BUILD Single-cut mahogany body, bolt-on solid torrefied mahogany neck, 12" radius ebony fingerboard with hand-inlaid aluminium line fret markers, 22 medium-jumbo hard nickel frets
HARDWARE Staggered-height locking machineheads with cream tulip buttons, PJE Design Shergold Custom T bridge (with option to string-through or top-load) with 3x compensated brass saddles
ELECTRICS 2x Seymour Duncan '59 humbucking pickups, volume, tone (with push-pull coil split), 3-way toggle selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.62"/625.5mm
NECK WIDTH 43mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21mm at first fret, 22.5mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.5mm at nut, 54mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.18kg/7lb
LEFT-HANDERS No
FINISH Solid Battleship Grey (as reviewed), Thru Black, Thru Dirty Blonde
CONTACT Barnes & Mullins
bandm.co.uk, shergoldguitars.com



The aluminium line fret markers are hand-inlaid

The 12th-fret position marker echoes the fingerboard inlays

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MAD PROFESSOR AMPLIFICATION

PRS
SE CUSTOM 24 LTD ED ROASTED MAPLE

WORDS DARRAN CHARLES

Torrefied maple brings a new flavour to a familiar PRS recipe, but does it sound and feel as good as it looks?

PRS's Korean-made SE range boasts a substantial number of models, but none sport a maple 'board, aside from this eye-catching limited-edition guitar that's new for 2019 and available across Europe. As is the fashion these days, the maple neck has undergone torrefaction, the now-familiar process whereby the neck is 'roasted' in a specialised vacuum in order to remove sugars, moisture and other impurities. This leads to a more stable, resonant and lighter wood, not to mention an appealing caramelised finish.

The quilted-maple veneer top is a feature of this limited-edition range, and while it's not as aqueous as some of the more expensive PRS USA models, it's still quite striking. In fact, it's the only model in the SE Custom line that has a quilt top.

The Wide Thin neck carve is common throughout the range. Unsurprisingly, it conjures up an image of a neck that is, well… wide and thin! But the reality is more of a rounded 'C' shape with a much fuller profile than the company's nomenclature would suggest.

While the frets are far from the vintage type that you would find on old-style Strats and Teles, they still feel quite shallow in height and ensure that the left-hand fingers are regularly in touch with the fretboard wood. However, thanks to the wonderful thin satin finish, we still experience a frictionless playability which, following a quick truss-rod adjustment, proves to be impeccable.

IN USE

The roasting appears not only to darken the wood but also the tone normally expected from a maple-neck guitar. The bridge pickup has all the power required from a rock guitar – essentially the genre in which the Custom 24 is most comfortable – but possesses little of the sometimes brittle high-treble frequencies that a high-powered bridge humbucker on a maple-neck guitar can sometimes accentuate.

There's plenty of clarity and definition on offer and when backing off the volume a little, we find we can cover a vast range of styles. The same cannot be said of the neck humbucker, which is rather bass-heavy and woolly sounding. This can be countered in split-coil mode and we discover some

The Custom has a graphite-based compound nut and nickel tuners

This is the only SE that features a quilted-maple veneer top

The Patented Tremolo is a trusty mechanism, but there's a Floyd Rose option, too

very usable rhythm sounds, though little in the way of syrupy-thick lead tones. Using a clean amp setting, the coil-split function further demonstrates the wide palette of sounds on offer and these are more reminiscent of a twangy Tele than a spanking Strat.

By now, the SE range is well established enough to be judged on its own merits, rather than being constantly compared to its more expensive brethren from Stevensville. Prices may have crept up a little over the years, but this is very much in line with quality, features and the wider market. Torrefied wood isn't just for the well-heeled anymore and it adds an interesting look and sonic signature – your search for a maple-neck PRS may well start and end here.

8/10 **A flawlessly built, worthy weapon of choice for pro and hobbyist alike**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Harley Benton CST-24 **€198**, Epiphone DC Pro **£499**, Fame Forum IV **£855**

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £799 (inc gigbag)
DESCRIPTION 6-string solidbody. Made in Korea
BUILD Mahogany body with quilted maple veneer and maple top, 24 frets, Wide Thin neck profile, set roasted-maple neck with 10"/254mm radius roasted maple fretboard, graphite-based compound nut, nickel-silver alloy frets
HARDWARE PRS Patented Tremolo, nickel PRS-designed tuners
ELECTRICS 85/15 'S' (neck) and 85/15 'S' (bridge) humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector, volume and push-pull tone control
SCALE LENGTH 25"/635mm
NECK DEPTH 21.2mm at 1st fret, 23.9mm at 12th fret
NECK WIDTH 43.6 mm at nut, 53.2 mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36.6mm at nut, 42.8mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.6kg/7.93lb
OPTIONS Floyd Rose version (£100 extra, Tobacco Sunburst and Whale Blue only)
LEFT HANDERS Yes (£25 upcharge, Tobacco Sunburst and Grey Black only)
FINISHES Trampas Green (as reviewed), Fire Red, Grey Black, Tobacco Sunburst, Whale Blue and Purple Burst
CONTACT PRS Guitars Europe
prsguitars.com

The 'board has a 10-inch radius and a thin satin finish

EASTMAN T59/V-RD

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

Gibson might be 'back', but the competition aren't resting on their laurels, either. Time to check out a thinline semi with a few ideas of its own…

Eastman's T59/v thinline semi has been around for a couple of years now, but Winter NAMM 2019 saw the company announce this updated version. Retaining the French-polished and aged patina pioneered in the company's violin department, here the T59/v has gained a gorgeous Antique Red finish, a hand-made pickguard and a narrower headstock design.

At first glance, the T59/v is now even more classic in its appearance, but the changes aren't all cosmetic: the more elegant slimline headstock has a much cleaner string path behind the nut than its predecessor, which is always good news for tuning stability. Meanwhile, the scratchplate certainly hasn't been fished out of a parts bin – it's hand-bound in grained ivoroid to match the body, neck and headstock.

Although the T59/v owes a great deal of inspiration to the ES-335, there are some important structural differences. Aside from the ebony fingerboard and headstock fascia, the neck is constructed from three pieces of maple with additional headstock 'wings'. The maple laminate body features top and back sections with beautiful figuring on the centre-joined outer layers, while peering inside the soundhole reveals a maple centre-block, with a 'window' cutout to aid maintenance.

The neck is a nicely rounded 'C' profile that nods in the direction of the T59's model name. Although the jack socket lives on the body edge and the bridge studs are screwed into bushings rather than directly into the body, for the most part, this guitar feels like 'home' for anyone familiar with old-style Gibson and Epiphone semis.

Look closely and the T59/v lacks the laser-precision of some builders – there's slight untidiness here around the neck join – but Eastman exhibits attention to detail where you really feel and hear it. The nibless fret-ends are nicely domed for player comfort and we're able to take the guitar straight into a recording session without the need for so much as an action tweak.

IN USE

With much more maple than mahogany in the equation, not to mention the ebony 'board, you might expect the T59/v to possess a rather brash acoustic tonality, but the reality is more balanced. Notes have bags of sustain and sparkle with complex,

The Gotoh Relic GE104B bridge with hard zinc saddles

Seymour Duncan Antiquity pickups are versatile and well balanced

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £1,679 (inc hard case)
DESCRIPTION Semi-hollow double-cutaway electric guitar. Made in China
BUILD Maple laminate top, back and sides with maple centre block. 3-piece set maple neck with 12" radius ebony fingerboard and headstock fascia. Grained ivoroid body, neck and headstock binding. 22 medium-jumbo Jescar 47104 frets. Split parallelogram pearl inlays. Bone nut
HARDWARE Aged nickel Gotoh Relic series GE104B bridge with hard zinc saddles, GE101A aluminium tailpiece, vintage-style tuners
ELECTRICS 2x Seymour Duncan Antiquity humbuckers, Switchcraft 3-way toggle switch, 500k audio-taper pots (2x volume, 2x tone)
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/629mm
NECK WIDTH 42.3mm at nut, 51.5mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22.5mm at first fret, 24.6mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36.9mm at nut, 51.9mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.6kg/8lb
FINISH Antique Red
CONTACT Eastman Guitars eastmanguitars.com

shifting harmonics, while there's an evenness across the strings as chords decay. Many great-sounding vintage ES-335s are a little banjo-like and can be underwhelming acoustically; this Eastman is not.

Plugged in is where it matters, of course, and like many unpotted humbuckers, the Seymour Duncan Antiquities do a fine job of translating the T59/v's harmonic richness into the amplified world. These pickups are perhaps wound a little hotter than most 50s units, but you get three distinct tones that are very well balanced in terms of output. The individual voices also stack up very nicely in a band arrangement.

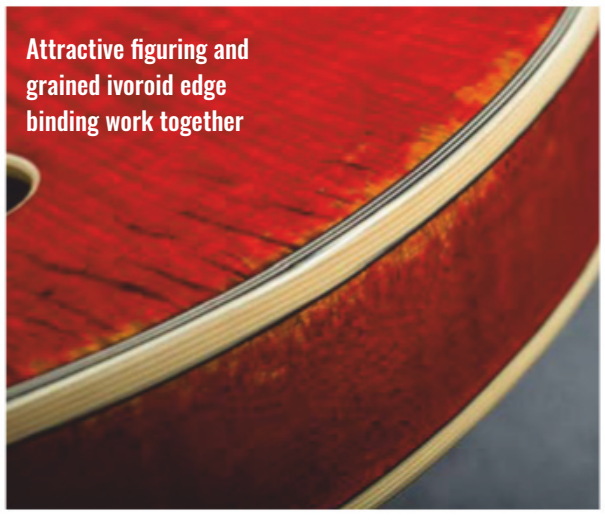
The bridge pickup can sometimes feel a touch undercooked in PAF replica sets, but here it has a pleasing blend of bite and power, while the middle setting is jangly and full of spank. Meanwhile, the neck pickup is softer and smoother, but retains clarity and can still sting when you need it to. Great tones and every inch a pro tool.

9/10 **Seriously versatile, with artful ageing, classic sounds and competitive pricing**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Gibson ES-335 Satin **£1,999**, Maybach Capitol '59 Cherry Aged **£2,660**, Guild Starfire IV **£980**

The headstock is slim, with a clear string path



Attractive figuring and grained ivoroid edge binding work together

STRYMON
VOLANTE

WORDS HUW PRICE

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

Strymon is a market leader in analogue-inspired digital effects, so any new launch is big news. Time to dive into a retro echo chamber with the Volante Magnetic Echo Machine…

There are several well-established delay pedals in Strymon's product line. The Brigadier simulates analogue 'bucket brigade' delays, while the El Capistan combines tape-echo effects with reverb. The TimeLine provides even more sophisticated retro and hi-fi echo effects, with added modulation and filtering in a larger stompbox format.

The Volante is similarly large, but it offers drum-style echo, along with tape echo and studio-style reel-to-reel tape delay. All the effects parameters are adjustable from the top panel and footswitches provide tap tempo, sound-on-sound, reverse, pause, splice, and infinite-repeat functions.

There are four virtual-playback heads that can be activated/deactivated individually. They can also operate at full or half volume – indicated by green and amber LEDs respectively. The output signal from each head can be sent back to the record head, with four switches activating/deactivating the feedback. Each head output can also be panned individually when using the Volante in stereo.

Parameters such as echo level, repeats, record level and time will be familiar to anybody who has used a delay pedal. Spring is simply a level control for the post-delay reverb effect and low cut rolls off the bass content of the repeats to prevent things from becoming muddy. Wear simulates drum or tape degradation, along with playback-head condition. Mechanics sets the amount of simulated speed fluctuations (typical of mechanical echo devices).

The upper edge accommodates left/right inputs and outputs and an instrument/line-level input-level switch allows the Volante to be used as a guitar or studio effect. There are also MIDI in and out sockets, a USB connector for controlling MIDI via a computer, and an expression-pedal input for connecting an external tap pedal, a quarter-inch jack to MIDI cable or Strymon's own three-button MultiSwitch Plus (£139).

The dry signal follows an analogue signal path with a JFET front end. 24-bit 96kHz converters handle the digital side for the SHARC DSP, with 32-bit floating-point processing. Input impedance is an industry standard 1M-ohm and output is a low-impedance 100-ohm. Users have the option of true bypass with silent electromechanical relay switching or an analogue buffered bypass. The chassis is aluminium with an

The Volante offers a musically versatile compilation of vintage-echo effects

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £399
DESCRIPTION Digital echo pedal. Made in the USA
FEATURES Stereo in/out, USB connectivity, MIDI In/Out, switchable instrument/line-level inputs, expression-pedal input, 9V external power supply
CONTROLS Rec level, low cut, mechanics, wear, type (drum/tape/studio), speed (half/normal/double), repeats, echo level, spacing, spring, 4x head switches, 4x feedback switches, on/off (reverse/hold), favourite/pause, tap (splice/hold)
CONTACT MusicPsych
musicpsych.com, strymon.net

anodised finish in Binson-style green and the Volante comes with a dedicated centre-negative 9v 300mA power supply.

IN USE

To assess the three operating modes, we select the third head only, activate feedback, set repeats to about halfway and then minimise wear and mechanics. The differences are fairly subtle, but the studio mode is noticeably cleaner, with minimal degradation in the repeats and very little pitch wobble. The drum mode sits at the opposite extreme, with repeat distortion increasing as treble degrades and a swirling pitch-shift reminiscent of a slow Leslie speaker. It's an effect with real depth and ambience that puts us straight into a Gilmour frame of mind. Tape mode is somewhere in the middle, sounding a tad less roomy and modulated than drum mode, but less clean than the studio setting.

The effect of the wear and mechanics controls quickly becomes apparent. Turn the wear control up and the speed at which the treble content of the repeats degrades increases. Mechanics sets the amount of pitch modulation and both controls have a satisfyingly wide and usable operating range. It certainly helps that the pitch modulation is asymmetrical, and sounds all the more natural for it.

One of the Volante's most appealing characteristics is the way it overdrives. Turning up the record level eases the echo into a smooth and warm style of clipping and you can restore the wet/dry balance by reducing the echo level. Layering distorted echoes under a clean tone creates

The unit also offers reverse, pause, infinite-repeat and splice functions

The rear panel packs a lot of connectivity and functionality into a relatively small area

an intriguing ambience and things get even better when reverb is added to the mix.

With four virtual heads and individually adjustable feedback sends, the Volante manages to conjure a seemingly inexhaustible variety of retro-flavoured echo effects. One minute we're channelling Hank Marvin in his pomp, then it's late-era Slowdive before we drift into ambient soundscapes. The only real difficulty is that it's all too easy to get sidetracked, because the Volante keeps taking you off in unexpected and inspiring directions. No doubt it will all become more predictable after a while, but the learning process will be a load of fun.

Although the Volante makes a decent job of slapback echo, we can't quite capture the dirty thickness of tone you hear from real Echoplexes or Copicats.

We compare the Volante with a Catalinbread Belle Epoch and quickly conclude that if slapback was priority one, the Volante wouldn't shift it off our pedalboard – the Volante is a unit pitched primarily at those who like their delay trails considerably longer than the Brylcreem brigade.

Reverb obsessives may also prefer a more specialised stompbox, but the Volante's reverb complements guitar tones and has a spring-like quality without being splatty or diffuse. Given how dirty and grungy the delays can get – if you want them to – it makes sense that Strymon has opted for a cleaner style of reverb.

Plugging into two amps simultaneously to test the stereo capabilities, we are immediately met with ground-loop hum. If you want to enjoy the full stereo potential of the reverb and ping-pong echoes, you'll have to devise a method of electronically isolating your amplifiers. Lifting the ground connection of one amp is potentially unsafe and therefore not a sensible solution.

Without extra switching devices, there are only eight presets available and there's no screen to indicate which is selected or what the delay time is, so you'll have to be accurate when tapping that tempo. Compared to the TimeLine, there's a restricted range of delay effects, but how often are you likely to use the more outlandish options? It wouldn't make sense for Strymon to risk cannibalising sales of a popular product in its range, so naturally the Volante brings something different to the table.

The Volante is something of a one-stop solution for vintage-style echo effects. It can do everything from The Shadows to psychedelia, shoegaze, 70s prog and beyond with equal aplomb. Yes, it's going to take up a lot of space on your board, but when you consider it's like four pedals in one – with reverb thrown in – both the footprint and the price are more than reasonable. Happy exploring.

9/10 **Hours of ambient fun with convincing tape and drum-style echo simulations**

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Fender AM HSS Strat - black - used/2003.....£790
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Fender Chris Shiflett Tele Deluxe - artic white - used/2012 .....£629
Fender Custom Shop 56 Relic Strat - candy tangerine - 2008 .....£2,190
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Fender Hank Marvin Signature Strat - Made in Japan - 1996 .....£899
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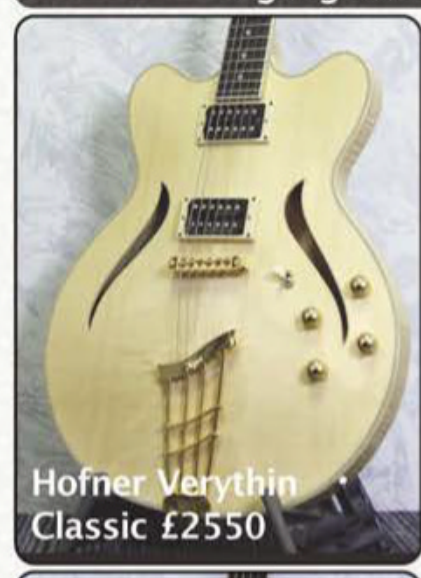
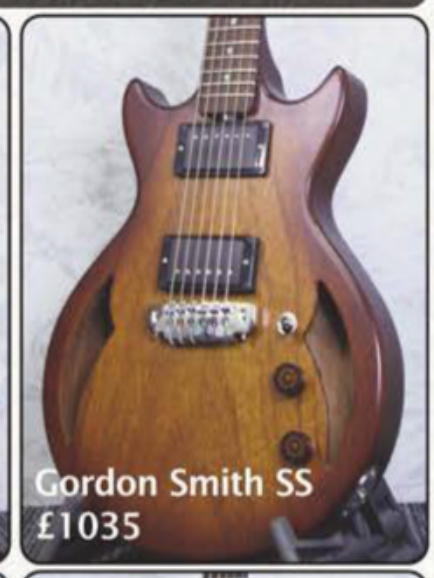
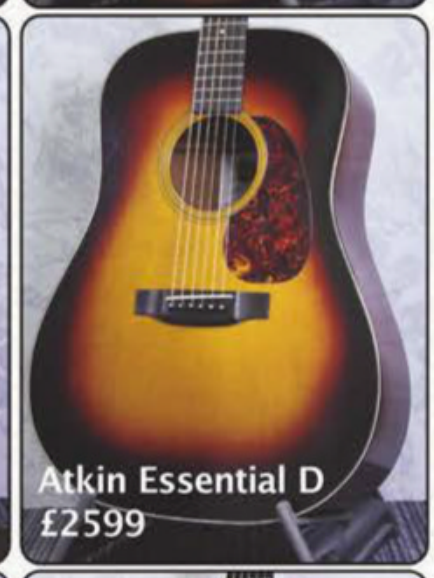
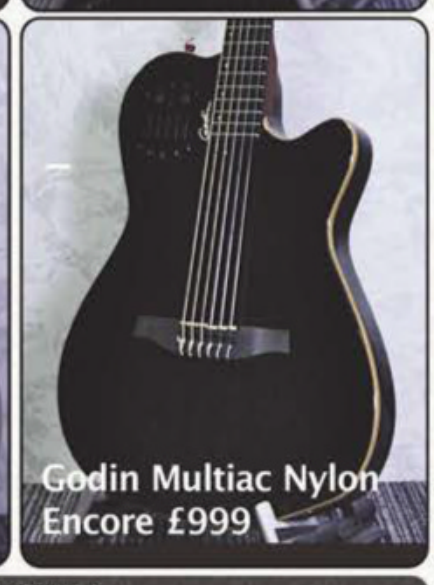
Highlights Of The Month









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MAD PROFESSOR
DOUBLE MOON

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

A new hand-wired take on modulation from Finland's finest pedal providers. We ponder the dualities…

Are your arpeggios lacking movement? Do your clean sounds feel uninspiring? It could be you need some modulation in your life. Where better to start than Mad Professor's new Double Moon? This new modulation station comes replete with 11 different takes on the theme of tonal oscillation, from gentle chorus and vibrato to jet-plane flange and all points in between.

Consistent with our expectations from this boutique brand, the Double Moon features rugged construction – perhaps even a little too rugged, as the textured gold finish can make the white silkscreen labelling difficult to read from certain angles, especially under lights.

Notwithstanding, we're soon up and running with a classic combination of Gretsch guitar and Vox amp. The Double Moon features five knobs: speed, depth and tone should be self-explanatory, but there is also a mode knob to select the kind of modulation most suited to the moment and a control knob which allows for precision adjustment, depending on the chosen mode.

IN USE

Starting fully counterclockwise on the mode knob are three flavours of chorus which increase in intensity from barely there to full Leslie-style gurgles, albeit without the kind of ramping control you'd find in a dedicated rotary-speaker emulator.

It's immediately apparent we're dealing with seriously high-quality sounds, with even the more extreme settings sounding warm and musical. Modes DC1 to DC3 feature two delay lines, modulated out of phase with one another, giving dual chorus effects. DC1 puts the two voices 180 degrees out of phase, DC2 keeps them 120 degrees apart and DC3 allows you to regulate the speed difference using the control knob.

The dual-chorus voicing adds another dimension. Gentle swirls become intense asymmetric throbs as we ramp up the depth and speed controls. As before, the quality of the sounds on offer remains consistently high. This tonal splendour is no doubt due to the Double Moon's true analogue, bucket-brigade signal path. While this configuration of capacitance is most commonly found on pure delay pedals, it certainly works in this instance.

Next up, we have a trio of flange settings which are so good we wonder why more modulation pedals don't offer this texture. That said, there's a slight question mark at

The Double Moon's modulation modes go all the way to 11

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £249
DESCRIPTION Multi-voice modulation pedal. Made in Finland
CONTROLS Speed, mode, depth, tone, control knobs
FEATURES Chorus, dual chorus, flange, vibrato modes; true analogue bucket-brigade signal path
DIMENSIONS 60 x 110 x 55mm
CONTACT Mad Professor Amplification mpamp.com

this point over the Double Moon's place in the signal chain. Many prefer their flangers pre-overdrive/distortion with chorus towards the end. In this case, we find with relief that the flanged sounds retain their power and clarity post-dirt.

The remaining modes on the Double Moon's dial are flange and chorus together (a rare combo) and a superb vibrato which, to our ears, may just be the best of an already impressive selection. G

8/10 **A dizzying array of inspiring and musical modulated tones for any style**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

ThorpyFX The Deep Oggin **£249**, Positive Grid Bias Modulation Twin **£329**, EHX Good Vibes Modulator **£135**

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THORPYFX

THE DEEP OGGIN CHORUS/VIBRATO

Guitar.com EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

An oceanic analogue chorus from a UK brand renowned for its boutique excellence. Time to get salty…

A relative newcomer to the world of boutique pedals, UK-based ThorpyFX is the brainchild of Adrian Thorpe MBE, whose hand-made stompboxes have been adorning the boards of discriminating tone viveurs since 2015. Thorpy's success thus far has mainly been founded on a selection of extremely high-quality overdrive, fuzz, and boost pedals, with The Deep Oggin (a collaboration with Dan Coggins – formerly of Lovetone and Dinosaural) one of the company's first forays into temporal effects.

As with all ThorpyFX pedals, The Deep Oggin's circuitry is protected by an armoured steel chassis which sports five mini chicken-head knobs and, on the top, an input jack and two outputs allowing for twin-amp wet/dry use. The sole footswitch is extremely heavy duty and this attention to longevity extends inside, with the jacks wired off-board to reduce potential stresses on the PCB. The pedal runs on 9V of DC and ThorpyFX recommends the use of a quality power source.

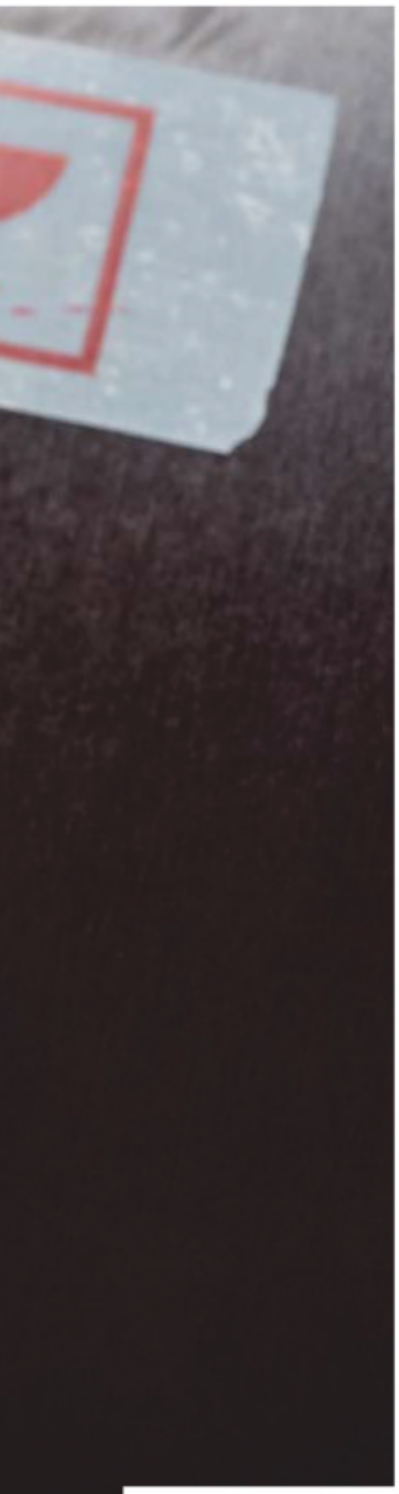
IN USE

Perhaps due to overuse, chorus as a concept has had a tough time over the last few years. Recently, however, there's been something of a resurgence – with several companies marketing their offerings with the promise of "a chorus pedal for people who hate chorus pedals". ThorpyFX has chosen to navigate these waters via the exclusive use of analogue circuitry, to avoid the vinegary characteristics typical of lesser units.

As The Deep Oggin commands a boutique price tag, the first notes ought to be pretty spectacular. An open-goal setup of neck/middle Strat tone into a hand-wired Vox AC4 conjures a beautiful wash of sound; it compels us to really listen to what we play and savour every note.

With the rate and depth increased, we coax an outstanding Leslie-style wobble, adding real depth to octave comping. For classic rock and blues, The Deep Oggin is nothing short of superb. From *No Quarter* warbling to *Walking On The Moon* chime via *Come As You Are* menace, this pedal imbues iconic sonic territory with new life and elegance.

The Deep Oggin also allows for a stereo amp setup. Assigning wet duties to a Fender and with the dry Vox at the point



KEY FEATURES

PRICE £249
DESCRIPTION Stereo analogue chorus/vibrato pedal. Made in the UK
CONTROLS Volume, treble, blend, rate, depth, bypass footswitch
FEATURES Hand-wired boutique construction, stereo out
DIMENSIONS 100 x 125 x 53mm
CONTACT ThorpyFX thorpyfx.com

of breakup, the results are nothing short of erogenous. Meanwhile, a deep, slow setting into a twin-channel acoustic amp with a Kostal Modified Dreadnought encourages us to re-examine long-held prejudices regarding chorus as an acoustic-guitar effect.

Investing this amount into a chorus pedal implies you either love quality pedals or you love chorus. With The Deep Oggin, you get both. It's not cheap, but it was built to a standard, not a budget – and it shows.

9/10 **Simply one of the finest chorus pedals we have ever heard, in an indestructible box**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Jam Pedals Waterfall Chorus **£220**, Strymon Ola Chorus Vibrato **£299**, Chase Bliss Audio Warped Vinyl MkII **£349**

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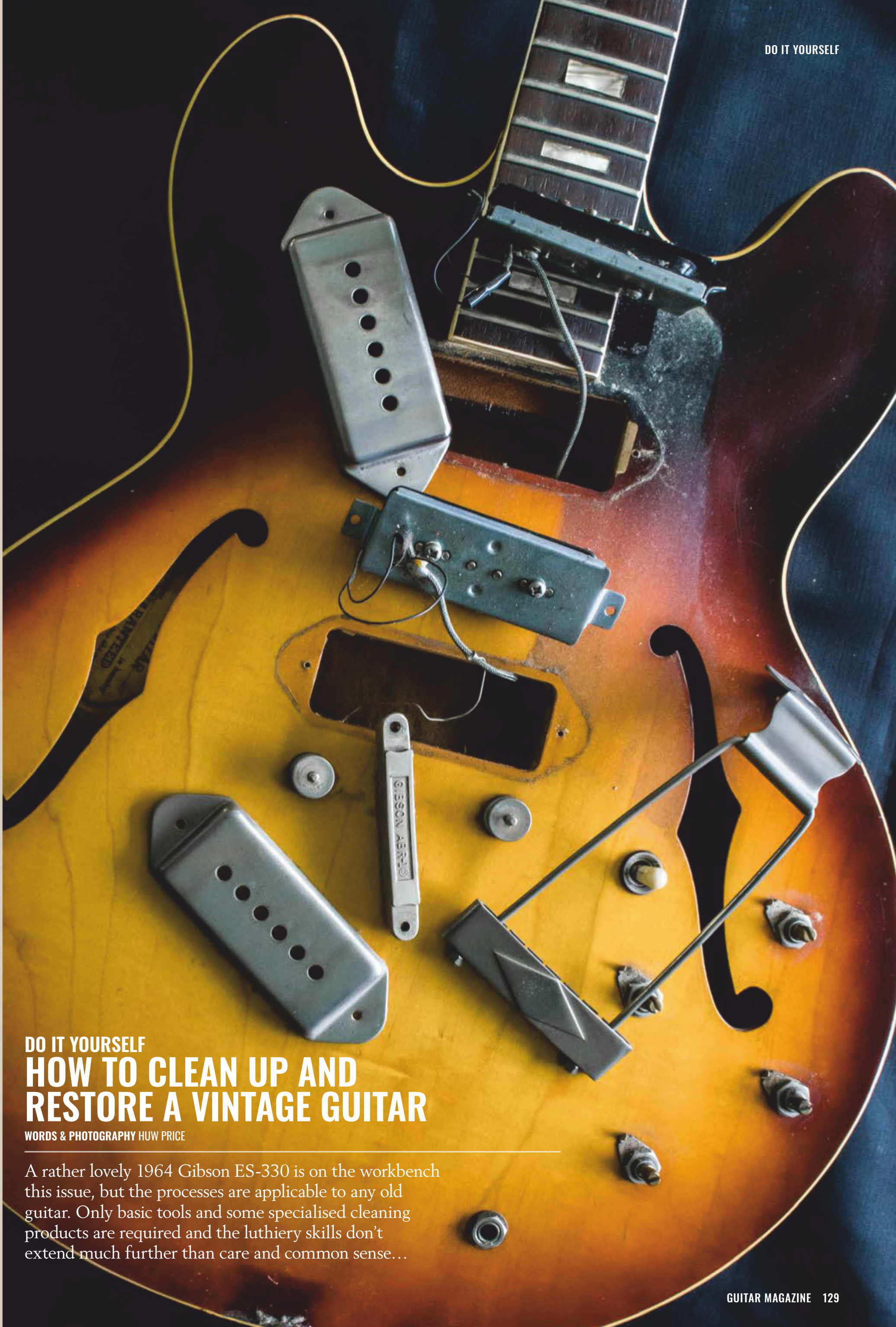


DO IT YOURSELF

HOW TO CLEAN UP AND RESTORE A VINTAGE GUITAR

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY HUW PRICE

A rather lovely 1964 Gibson ES-330 is on the workbench this issue, but the processes are applicable to any old guitar. Only basic tools and some specialised cleaning products are required and the luthiery skills don't extend much further than care and common sense…

This ES-330 was recently acquired from its second owner, Paddy Collins, whose dad bought it for him from Snell's music shop in Swansea, UK back in 1967. Paddy's bandmate in the early days was Mike Japp, who later played with Marmalade and Joe Brown's band and went on to write songs with Paul Stanley, among others. When Paddy switched to drums, Mike would often play this ES-330 and according to Paddy, he was the last person to string the guitar up.

Sadly, Mike Japp passed away in 2012, so these strings do need changing. But that's the least of it – Paddy stopped playing a long time ago and the guitar has spent most of the last 30 years stored in its case. The upshot is that the finish is in decent shape, but the lacquer is very dull and dirty and all the nickel parts have oxidised.

Although some vintage-guitar owners are reluctant to clean their guitars, I prefer them when they look cared for and feel nice. I would make a distinction between dirt and patina and, on a practical level, I find guitars play better and strings last longer when fingerboards are dirt-free and frets are shiny and smooth. So here's how to clean up the parts and finish as we detail the processes required to make a wonderful old guitar look and sound its best…

INITIAL ASSESSMENT

Although the guitar is mostly original, for some reason, the neck-pickup cover is the wrong way around and the bridge-pickup tone knob has been replaced. It's a different colour and size to the others and it won't push down onto the control pot.

We check the electrics and everything turns out to be working – except the bridge tone control. Peeking inside with an inspection mirror, all the pots and the 'black beauty' tone capacitors appear to be original. The wiring harness will have to come out so I can fix or replace the potentiometer and I plan to source a vintage knob to replace the non-original part.

Missing fingerboard inlays are all-too common on vintage Gibsons, but I'm relieved to see that all the inlays are still present and correct on this ES-330. Even so, most are just about hanging in there and will need to be re-glued. The fingerboard is relatively clean, but I think there's room for improvement.

Happily, the finish is largely unfaded and retains its vibrant mid-60s sunburst. Lacquer checking is fairly moderate but the finish looks dull and grimy. There's a cloudy milkiness that's particularly apparent on the darker edges of the 'burst, along with the grease marks and dirt build-up that are typical of any well-used guitar.

STRIPPING DOWN

It's very easy to lose vital parts when dismantling a guitar, so I always have an old tub in close proximity to keep everything in one place. I begin by removing the strings, tailpiece, bridge and thumbwheels. Lifting off the tailpiece reveals the ground wire and I suggest placing masking tape over the wire if you want to prevent it from being pulled inside the body.

Since the harness is coming out, it's not necessary in this case and I remove all the nuts and pointer washers from the potentiometers. I also remove the jack-socket nut and use a specialised tool to release the knurled nut from the switch.

I remove both pickup covers and pull the pickups out of their holes and place them to one side. With a little encouragement, the harness drops into the body and I'm able to pull everything out of the bridge-pickup cavity. A colossal dust ball has wrapped itself around the harness and after dislodging it, I set about brushing all the remaining dust off the pots and switch.

The pots feel stiff, so they all get a generous squirt of DeoxIT D5 cleaner, which loosens them up considerably. I decide to test the harness while it's out of the body and to my relief, I discover that the bridge tone control is functioning again and everything appears to be in perfect working order. This is an opportunity to read the date codes on the potentiometers and I discover they were all made by CTS

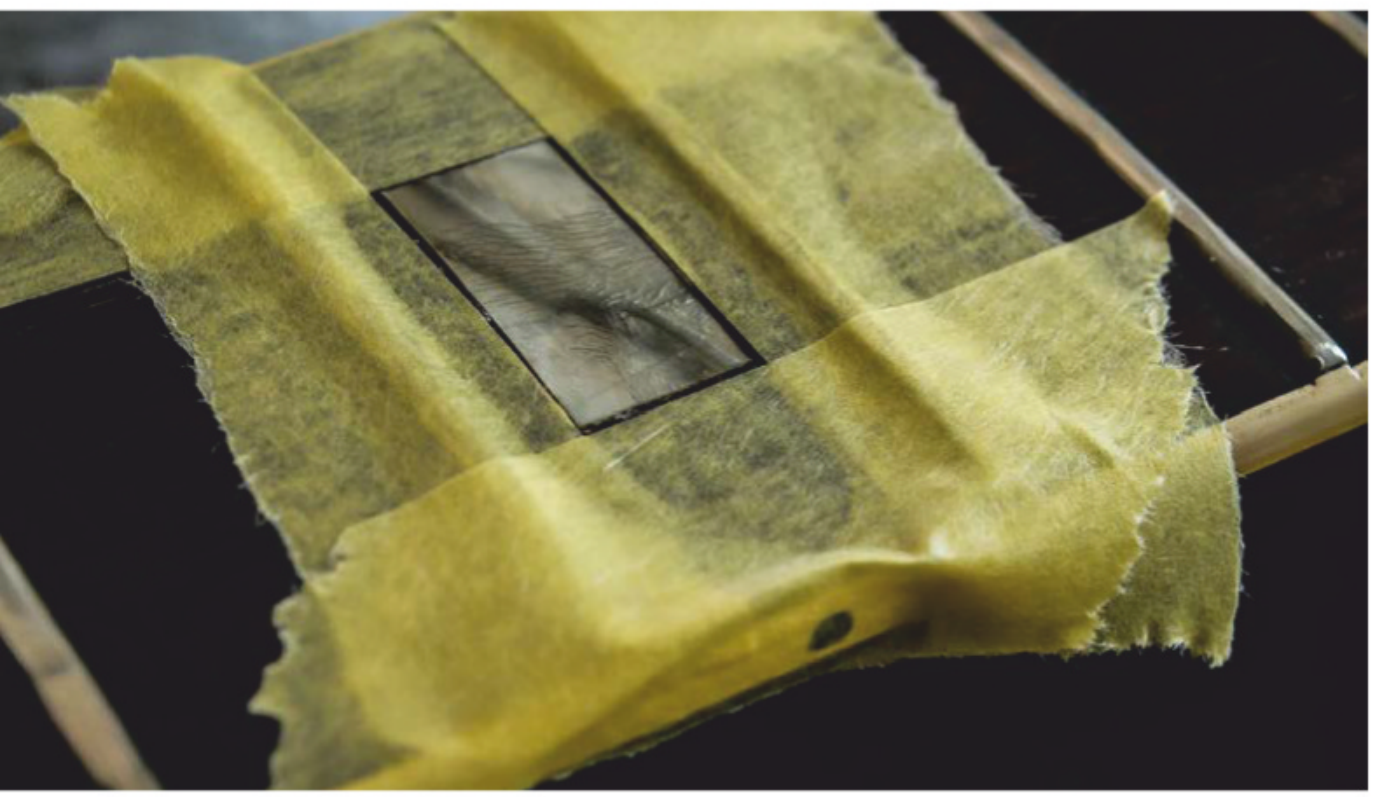
OPPOSITE The bridge tone knob is a later replacement that's a different size and colour and doesn't fit on a CTS pot shaft

ABOVE TOP The grungy area between the bridge and tailpiece shows what most of the finish looks like and the hardware has seen better days

ABOVE MIDDLE Copious debris attached to the wiring harness may be why the controls feel stiff and the bridge tone isn't working

LEFT TOP The codes reveal that all the potentiometers were made by CTS in 1964

LEFT BOTTOM Removing the controls reveals the original lacquer colour and demonstrates how the sunburst has retreated towards the body edges



ABOVE TOP All but one of the fingerboard marker blocks are becoming detached and will have to be glued back down

ABOVE MIDDLE Masking tape protects the wood as water-thin Super Glue wicks under the marker block

RIGHT TOP Prior to 1965, Gibsons had nickel-plated hardware rather than chrome and over time it becomes grey and dull

RIGHT BOTTOM This ES-330 still has its ABR-1 bridge and it's even dirtier than the pickup covers

OPPOSITE This before-and-after shot shows how much difference can be made with a few seconds of polishing

in the 46th week of 1964. I also clean the finish around all the cavities while I have unobstructed access, but I'll discuss that in more detail later.

I won't pretend that getting a wiring harness inside a semi-hollow or hollowbody guitar is easy and the first time I tried it, it took me a fortnight to put my guitar back together – a 1965 ES-330, in case you're wondering. I've tried all the luthier tricks such as lengths of rubber tubing over the pot shafts and nylon threads to pull everything back through the holes, but I've always got myself into a tangle.

Instead, I tie threads only to the jack socket and neck tone pot, because I find that once they're back in position, the other parts usually line up under the holes and two threads are a lot less likely to tangle. Once that's navigated successfully, the reinstalled controls can be tested once again and focus shifts to the fingerboard inlays.

GLUING THE BLOCKS

All but one of the celluloid markers has lifted at one end or the other and rather than remove each one, clean out all the old glue and stick them back down, I prefer to run water-thin Super Glue under them and press them tight while the glue goes off. This technique may not be universally popular, but I've never had one lift back up.

I focus on one inlay at a time and before applying the glue, I lay masking tape around the block to prevent the glue from spreading where it's not required. Water-thin glue wicks into the gaps and it doesn't take long before the block is stuck fast and I can peel off the masking tape. Where there is glue squeeze-out, I'm able to scrape it flush using a utility knife blade and the whole job is completed quite quickly.

REVIVING THE FINISH

I'm always astonished how well vintage Gibson lacquer cleans up. Grease and oils tend to get into the finish and layers of dust and dirt will give even the best-preserved finish a dull and hazy appearance. I also find that when the lacquer on the back of a neck is left uncleaned, it can feel increasingly sticky and slow after being played for a while.

Traditionally, guitarists and techs have used automotive-style abrasive compounds such as T-Cut, Farécla G3 and machine polish to buff out lacquer finishes. I'm not a huge fan of T-Cut on guitar finishes because I find it quite aggressive; I dislike

the ammonia and when it dries, it leaves a powdery residue in chips and cracks.

My preferred product is Virtuoso Premium Cleaner, because it's so effective at lifting all the grease and dirt out of a finish without damaging it. In addition, to bringing a finish back to its best, I find it cures the aforementioned sticky neck problem. It still takes a lot of elbow grease, but if you're patient, the results can be stunning.

You can follow up with a specialised guitar polish and on this occasion, I go with MusicNomad Pro Strength. The Virtuoso polish is good, too, and most experts recommend avoiding polishes containing silicone.

In total, I spend a few hours cleaning and polishing, taking off the tuners during the process. By the end, the finish is gleaming and the colours appear far more vibrant. The high shine will dull naturally over time, but little effort will now be required to bring it back. My primary concern was to clean the finish rather than make the guitar look like new and it has certainly been worth it.

DARK METAL

Although this ES-330 has metal pickup covers, as a 1964 example, the plating is nickel rather than chrome. While chrome tends to retain its gleam, nickel has a softer look and tendency to dull down as it oxidises.

In large part, that's why most vintage-guitar fans prefer nickel to chrome, but the plated parts on this guitar have turned a dull grey and developed an unpleasant, powdery texture. I certainly don't want to try to make the hardware look new again, but I do want to restore some of the nickel colour and lustre.

I opt for Autosol chrome cleaner and begin polishing up the parts by hand. Compared to the lacquer, I actually spend relatively little time on this because I'm able to achieve the look I want quite quickly. I'm also careful to remove all the polish residue.

The only part of this clean-up operation that's especially laborius is dealing with the ABR-1 bridge. I carefully remove the corroded retaining wire, mindful of how prone they are to snapping. The nylon saddles are removed and placed to one side in order, ready for refitting once the bridge is polished.

Before too long, I'm ready to mount all the hardware back onto the guitar. I replace the knobs, too – including a vintage replacement that I found online. In the process, I learned that not all vintage reflector knobs were created equal and there are differences in height, the depth of the collar around the top and the height of the pot shaft section in the centre relative to the gold lacquer.

Once shipping and taxes were added to the purchase price, this replacement knob ended up costing almost £40. It seems a bit crazy, but at least the ES-330 has a full set of matching knobs once again and the fact that the lettering has worn off is neither here nor there.

BACK ON THE 'BOARD

Cleaning the finish and hardware is an aesthetic preference and some vintage-guitar fans may prefer the way this guitar looked before I started cleaning it up. I respect that and think it's a perfectly valid standpoint, but I don't think it sensible to apply the same argument to bare-wood fingerboards.

It might be fun to speculate on what the dark buildup that develops on fingerboards actually is. I'd suggest an amalgamation of finger grease, fat, dirt, sweat, salt and dust – with a bit of dried blood thrown in for good measure. Bent strings won't slide across 'board gunk as easily as clean wood, and the dirt and salt will attack your strings and shorten their life. If you think fingerboard gunk is mojo, then that's your prerogative, but this 'board is getting cleaned.

My concern is always to preserve the vintage look and feel, so avoid scraping 'boards with a blade or credit card. Instead, I use naphtha – aka lighter fluid – applied to a piece of kitchen towel.

Naphtha is a gentle cleaner that dissolves the detritus and lifts out the oil and grease. It does take a bit of time and you need to get right up close to the frets, but it will eventually remove all the dirt without taking any wood with it.

The only downside is that naphtha will lift out the wood's natural oils, too. Once the naphtha has completely evaporated, I wipe the 'board with a product such as Music Nomad F-One or Dunlop Lemon Oil, allow it to soak in, then wipe off any excess and buff up with a clean cloth.

Occasionally, a very dried-out 'board may need a couple of oil applications, but so long as the guitar is played regularly and kept clean, oiling the 'board is something that may only need to be done once a year. The final step is to polish the frets using Crimson Fret Rubbers – I'm pleased with the outcome.

COMES WITH STRINGS

The whole process takes up most of a day, but with its new set of strings, this ES-330 is playing and sounding better than it has in decades. I think it will be even better after a fret-levelling, and the nut looks like it has seen better days, but I'll save all that for another day. In the meantime, I'll concentrate on channelling my inner Grant Green… G

OPPOSITE TOP We've seen vintage guitars with far dirtier fingerboards than this, but it still needs a clean

OPPOSITE BOTTOM After a naphtha wipe down, re-oiling and a fret polish, the fingerboard looks and feels a lot better

ABOVE The guitar is strung back up and ready to go

LEFT After a day's restoration work, the ES-330 is playing and sounding better than it has for decades

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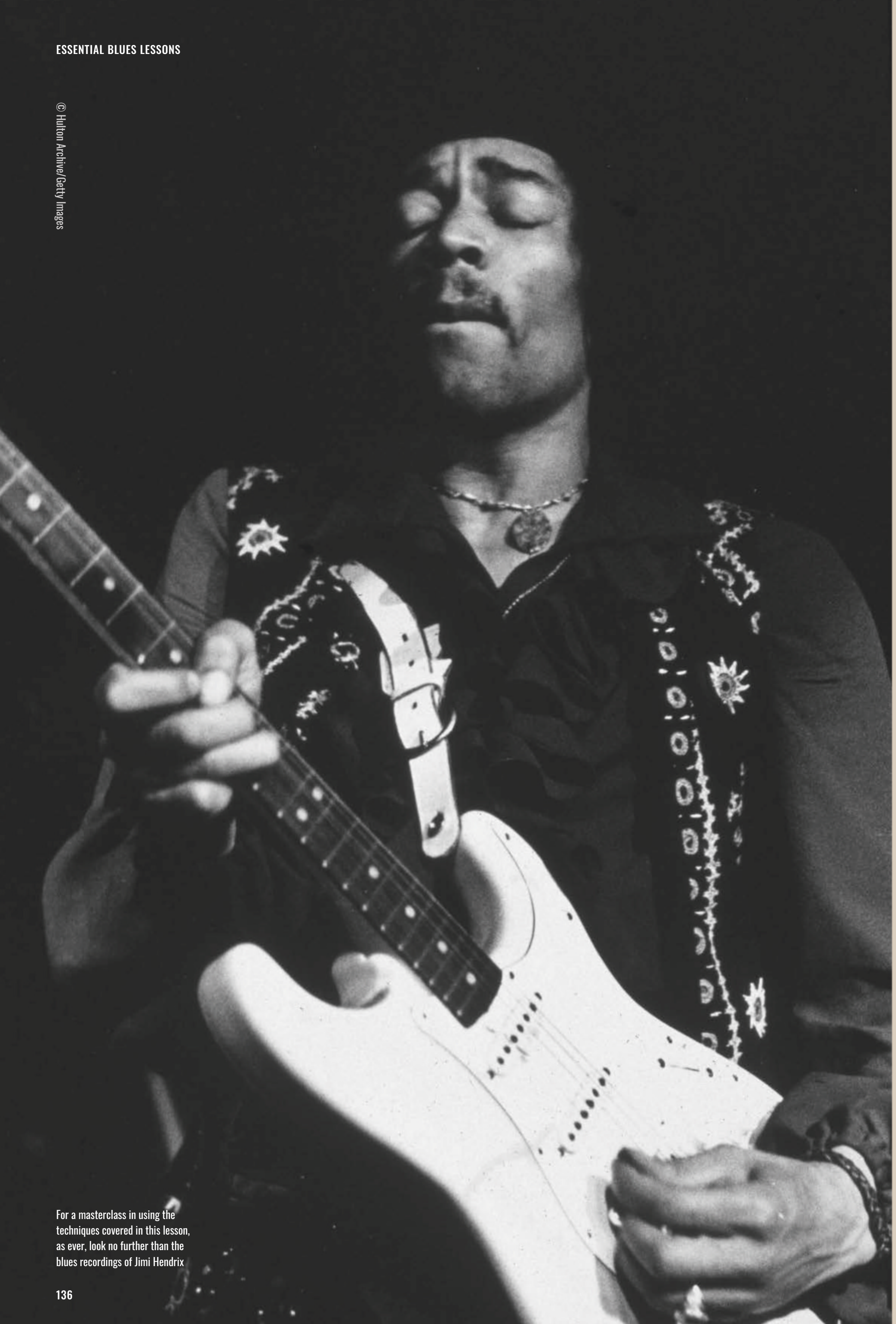


For a masterclass in using the techniques covered in this lesson, as ever, look no further than the blues recordings of Jimi Hendrix

HAMMER-ON

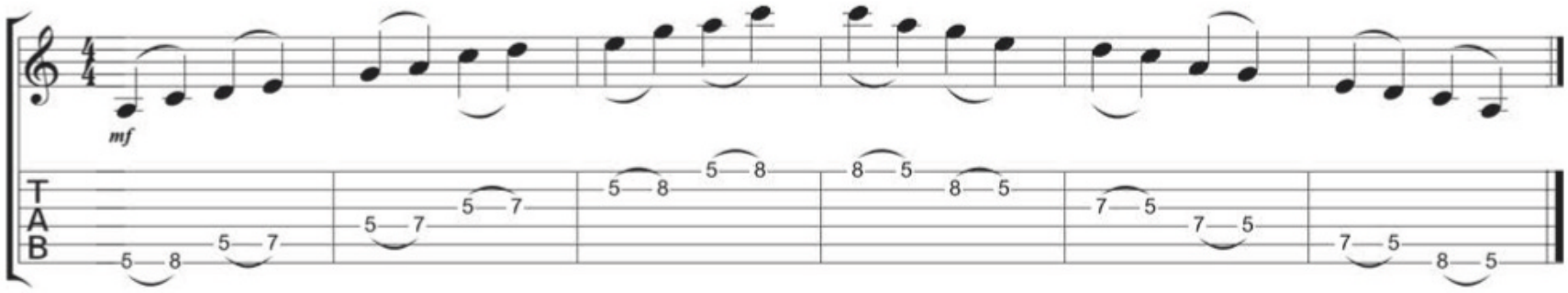
PULL-OFF

SLIDE

EXAMPLE 1

EXAMPLE 2

EXAMPLE 3



ESSENTIAL BLUES LESSONS

PART SEVEN LEFT-HAND TECHNIQUE – LEGATO

WORDS LEIGH FUGE

In the seventh part of our essential guide to blues playing, we focus on how to improve your fretting-hand technique to begin to add character to your blues lead-guitar playing

In Part Six, we talked about using our 12-bar blues pattern and integrating some picked notes from the minor pentatonic scale. Now that we're familiar with some of the notes we can use, it's time to look at some fretting-hand techniques we can start to apply to enhance the notes we're playing.

The following techniques we're going to discuss all fall into an overarching concept called legato. Legato is an Italian term which translates to "tied together". This means we'll be playing multiple notes with one pick stroke and making sure they tie together with our fretting hand.

HAMMER-ON

The hammer-on is a very common technique in guitar and virtually all guitar players use it. To perform a hammer-on, you place your finger on a note and play the note, then using your fretting hand, 'hammer' onto another note with a different finger. You will need to push the second note hard enough to make it sound out. If the second note chokes, or is quieter than the first, you aren't hammering on hard enough.

PULL-OFF

A pull-off is the opposite to a hammer-on. Instead of hammering onto a higher note, we are now pulling off to a lower note. The principle behind this remains the same: we're using two fingers, except this time, both fingers need to be in place before you pick the note. You're picking the higher note and pulling that finger off to allow the note fretted by the lower finger to take over. When pulling off, you should give the string a slight downward flick with your higher finger to allow the second note to sound a little louder than it would otherwise.

SLIDE

A slide is when you play a note and literally slide to another note with the same finger without lifting pressure off the string. You should aim to get from one note to the other without 'dragging' any frets in between. If you drag your finger too hard,

EXAMPLE 4

EXAMPLE 5

EXAMPLE 6

you'll hear each note in between the start note and target note. As you get to know the technique, you'll realise there's a fine line between pressing too hard and dragging your finger along the notes, and taking the pressure off and killing the note before you hit your target.

You can slide up from one note to a higher note or start at a higher note and slide down to a lower note.

EXERCISE 1

This exercise uses both hammer-ons and pull-offs and the notes are taken from the A minor pentatonic scale. The first three bars are ascending through the scale using hammer-ons. You will be picking the 5th fret on each string and hammering onto the 7th or 8th fret as you go. The final three bars are descending back through the scale using pull-offs. This time, you'll be picking the higher note of each string and pulling off to the lower. Remember to have both fingers in place before pulling off.

EXERCISE 2

This exercise uses hammer-ons and notes from the A minor pentatonic scale, but in a less 'scalic' way. This will lend a more natural feel and sound to what you're playing and shares more common ground with how you'd use these in the real world.

EXERCISE 3

Similar to Exercise 2, this exercise follows the same format – but now we're using pull-offs in place of hammer-ons.

EXERCISE 4

This exercise follows the exact same note groupings as Exercise 1, except instead of hammer-ons and pull-offs, we are now sliding up and down, to and from each note. The first three bars are ascending slides; you will be picking the first note and sliding to the second.

The final three bars are descending, so the highest note will be picked and slid down to the lowest.

EXERCISE 5

As we've already seen during Exercise 2, this has all-ascending slides in the place of hammer-ons. Practising and mastering this will allow you to get a feel for slides across different strings, rather than following a scale pattern. All of the slides in this exercise are ascending slides from a low note to a high note.

EXERCISE 6

This exercise embodies the same concept as the previous one, except this time, the slides are descending from a high note to a low note.

TRY IT YOURSELF

A good place to start to integrate these techniques is to revisit the patterns that you learned in Part 6 of our Essential Blues lessons, as you will find many instances where you can replace two picked notes with hammer-ons, pull-offs and slides.

If you've enjoyed this lesson and you're looking for a guitar teacher in your local area, check out our guitar lessons page on mgrmusic.com and speak to one of our highly recommended tutors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Fuge is a guitar teacher and professional musician from Swansea in the UK. He's taught hundreds of students face-to-face and via the MGR Music platform, and has over 10 years of experience working in the industry as a touring musician, session guitarist and teacher.

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- Some Lacquer checking

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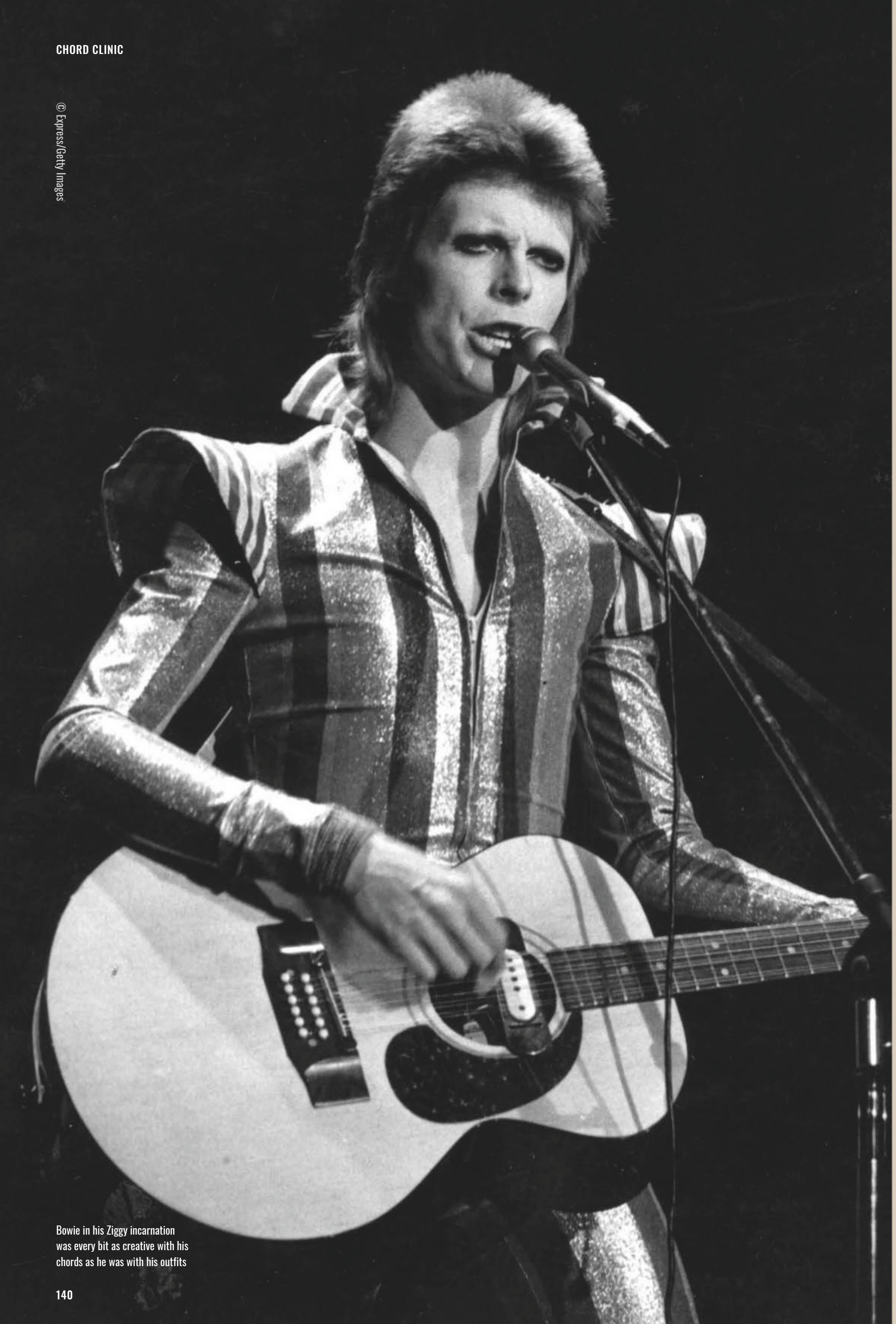
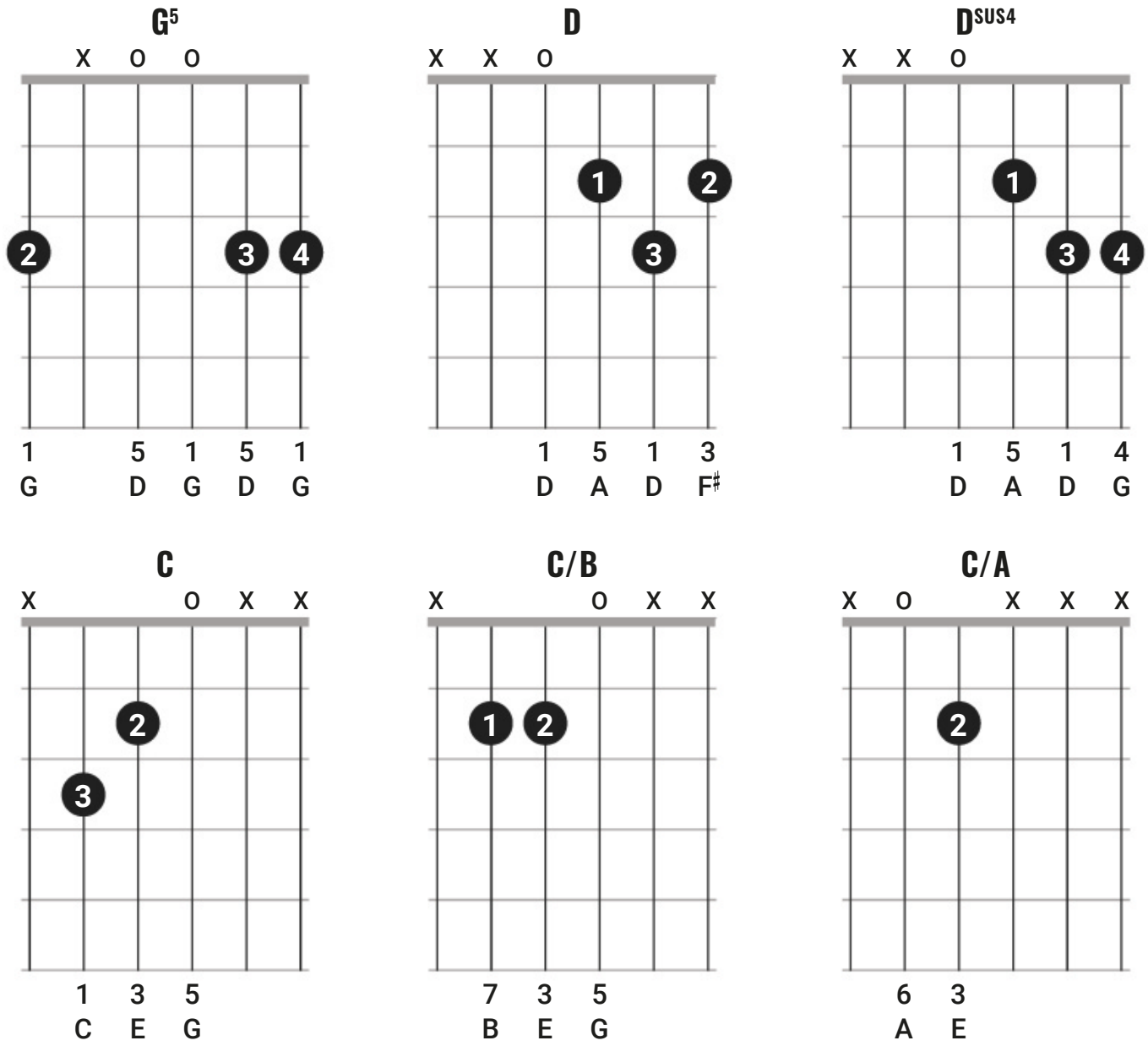


Bowie in his Ziggy incarnation was every bit as creative with his chords as he was with his outfits

FIGURE 1



CHORD CLINIC

HOW TO PLAY DAVID BOWIE-STYLE CHORDS PART ONE

WORDS ROD FOGG

Few songwriters have ever matched the breadth and range of David Bowie – and with Mick Ronson on guitar, he truly hit his stride. We take a look at some chord sequences inspired by the classic early albums…

While *Hunky Dory*, Bowie's fourth album, was a critical success, it was *The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars* that made his commercial breakthrough. The album was underpinned by some iconic rock guitar mixed with Bowie's penchant for lengthy and complex chord sequences.

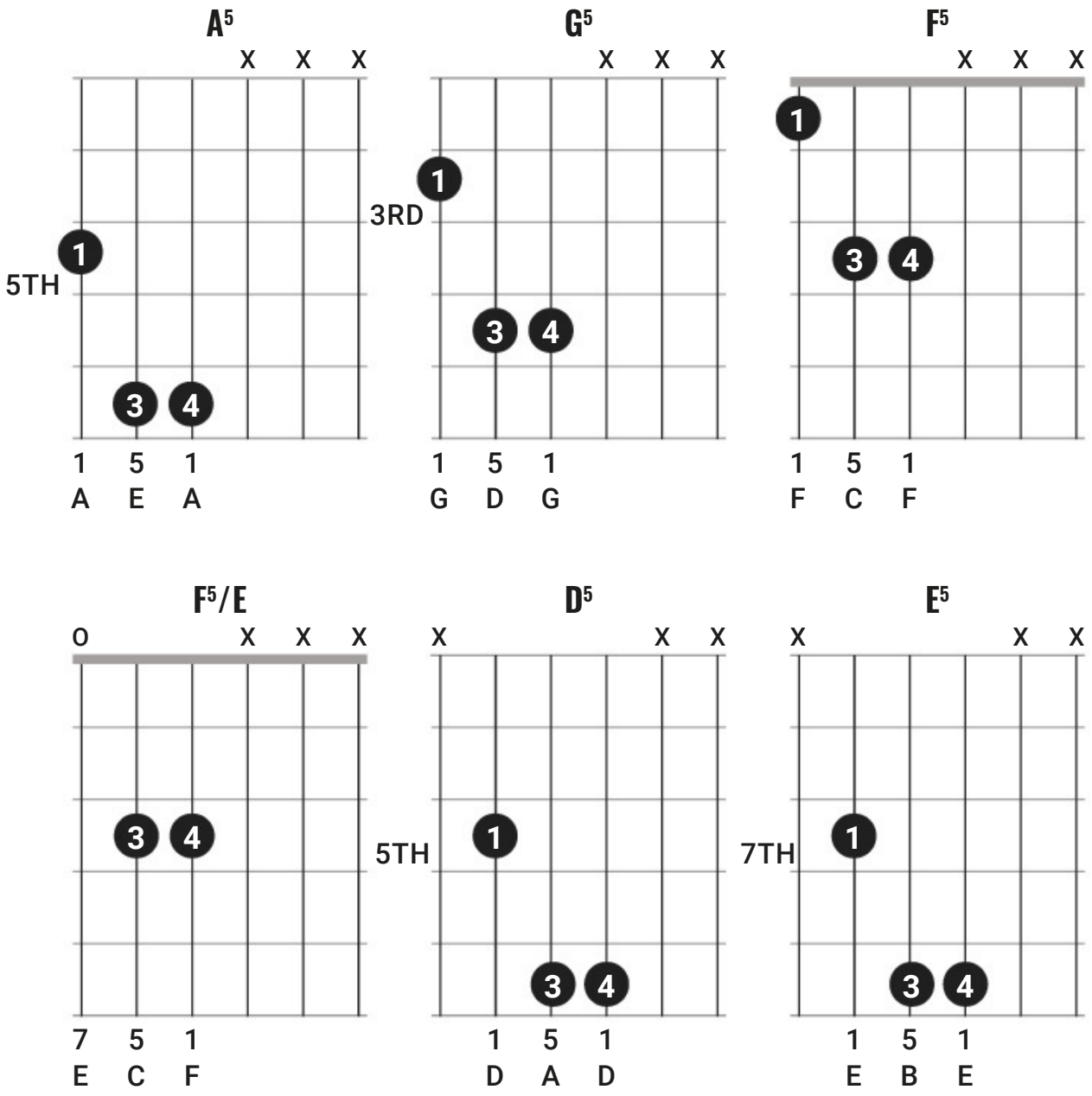
Let's get started with figure 1 and a big five-note G5 chord, played just once on your electric with a crunchy guitar sound. If you have one, you could experiment with a half-cocked wah-wah pedal for a more distinctive tone; use the underside of your second finger to mute the fifth (A) string. Next, switch to alternating between the D and Dsus4 chords, either as a hammer-on and pull-off or, Mick Ronson-style, strumming with up and down strokes as you wiggle your fourth finger on and off. These three chords all fit in one bar.

The next three chords in figure 1 are played as arpeggios; work through them playing one note at a time, low to high. Essentially, you are playing C major with a descending bassline, so some of these chords might not look much like C major, but the harmony is supplied by the rest of the band. Then it's back to the beginning and round again, creating a repeatable two-bar riff in the style of an intro.

We will take a look at some typical verse chord sequences later, but right now, we're going to jump to the chorus. Figure 2 introduces A5 and G5 chords; these are played in one bar, and in the next bar we alternate between F5 and F5/E on every beat, creating a two-bar sequence which can be repeated. Try playing it three times and then use the D5 and E5 chords for four beats each, as a way out of the sequence.

E5 would normally point towards A major, but in this case, it heads back to the top of figure 1 and the G5 chord to go round again. This riff dates from when rock was still transitioning into heavy metal, and the 'five' chord was nothing like as commonplace as it would become in a few years. That makes it relatively original and innovative for its time.

FIGURE 2



In our recent Chord Clinic on Johnny Marr, we found that four unrelated, but expressive chords can make a good introduction. Enter figure 3, where it turns out the idea had been around for a few years. Hold each of the first four chords for a full four beats, with a clean sound and just enjoy the dreamy, ambiguous quality before strumming hard on a bar of F5.

For the next bar, we've gone for alternating between D5 and D6, with a Chuck Berry rock 'n' roll style. In fact, any rock 'n' roll style bassline would do the job here. It is strange to follow four jazzy chords in no particular key with some rock 'n' roll alternating between F and D, which are themselves also not related to any particular key. Once the verse comes in it is, somewhat surprisingly, in the key of C major. Welcome to the world of Bowie.

For verses, there are often conventional four-chord sequences – G, Bm, C, D, for example. Although in keeping with the tendency of songwriters in the 70s to use many chords per song, on repeat, the B minor chord might become E minor; and A minor and C could also take the place of C and D. Something like G, Em, Am, C. Try these progressions using chords that you know – listen to *Ziggy Stardust* for some inspiration.

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FIGURE 3

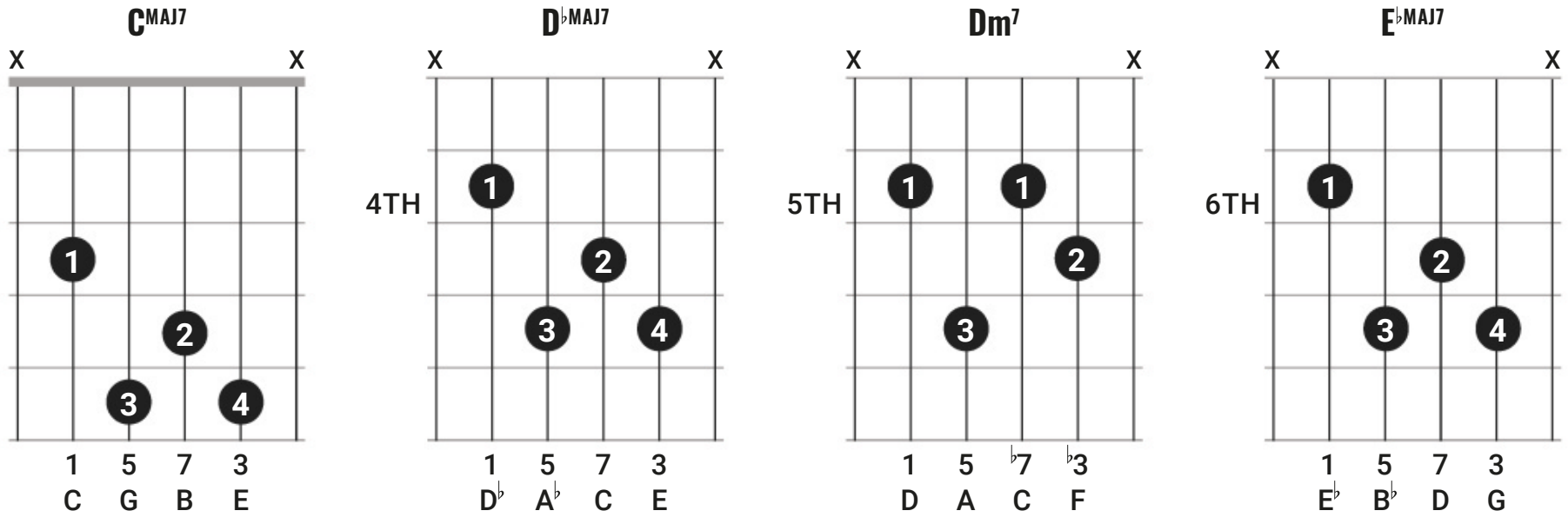
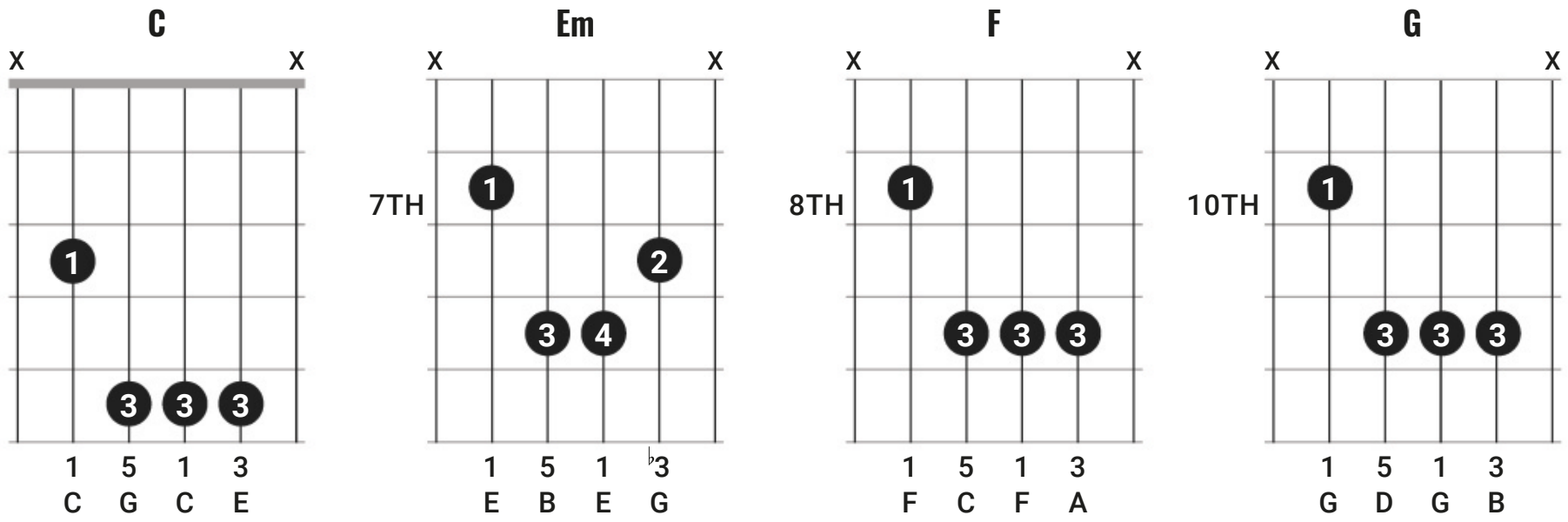


FIGURE 4



In figure 4, we have a set of four chords which are intended to follow on from figure 3. Notice that the outer strings are muted on all four shapes, so if you're using finger three as a barre, remember we don't want to hear it holding down the first (high E) string. If that's a challenge, just use fingers two, three and four instead.

Give these chords a bar each, held or strummed. When you get to the fourth bar you can either play G for the whole bar, or switch back to F halfway through, before repeating the whole sequence. In this example, the opening chords from figure 3 don't reappear until the very end of the song, and in reverse order, so that they end on the home key of C major.

Next month, there's more Bowie, with a look at Rick Wakeman's influence and how his piano stylings can work on the guitar. G

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INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER **PHOTOGRAPHY** JOE SUPPLE

The guitarist and YouTube star on backstage boxing, miniature monuments and why you should be the worst guitarist in the room…

The moment it all started…
"*Top Of The Pops* was extremely influential to me as a child and watching Matt Bellamy with his bright red hair perform *New Born* was definitely a big moment. I couldn't believe it was possible to sing and play guitar at the same time, so I would sit in my bedroom trying to learn the riffs to their songs on an old Spanish guitar my great grandmother had once owned. Boys at my school were being given electric guitars at the same time. I just wanted to front a band of my own one day and be Matt Bellamy."

I couldn't live without my…
"Definitely my Vigier GV Rock in Revolution Green. That guitar has always felt so perfect in my hands and has never caused me any problems on stage. I've owned it for almost four years and in that time, my career has completely changed. It's eye-catching and extremely versatile, it plays like a dream and I know how lucky I am to own it."

The first thing I play when I pick up a guitar…
"If I'm at my studio desk and need a break from editing a video or catching up on emails, I'll grab a guitar and just sit and play through a new song I've written. Songwriting to me has always been therapeutic, so it hits the reset button and I've always loved including intricate guitar parts into my music."

The best advice I've ever been given…
"Always be the worst player in the room. I learnt that from studying classical music. If you want to improve, you need to be challenged, so sit with players that are levels above you and you'll learn a lot."

My Spinal Tap moment…
"I thankfully haven't really had one yet, but there's still plenty of time! I grew up very close to Stonehenge – so maybe I'll just have to get a miniature version for my stage scenery…"

My guilty pleasure…
"I never feel guilty about my music taste. However, people are often surprised to know that I love electronic pop music. Artists I'm currently listening to are G Flip, Hannie and Rachel K Collier. They all write and produce their own music and I've learnt so much from how they craft their songs."

Can I be in the band…
"The drama would have been too much to take, but imagine being in Fleetwood Mac!"

I wish I was there…
"I love intimate venues and would've loved to have seen Amy Winehouse when she played at The Louisiana in Bristol in 2003. She was such a great guitar player, too."

My fantasy rider…
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If I could just play one thing…
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